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CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Should We Have Private Universities?

by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

While the government plans to set up more universities, whether by upgrading some of the leading colleges or as fresh establishments, public opinion is divided on the question of establishing some universities in the private sector. A noted academician and litterateur, the author, in this article, considers the pluses and the minuses of the proposition while he throws a look at the state of higher education in the country.

DESPITE widespread educated unemployment, the demand for higher education shows no sign of abatement. This is reflected, if not so much in the number of universities (from six in 1970 to seven in 1990, with two more in the offing) surely in the steady increase in enrolment. For one place in our universities, there are anything between fifteen to thirty applications. Those who cannot find a place in one of the university departments, are ultimately absorbed in one or other of the four hundred and -fifty-odd degree colleges spread all over the country. In 1986-87, a total of 110 thousand students came out successful in Higher Secondary Examination, of which roughly one- third can be said to have had the necessary qualification for admission to an honours course at a university. Out of approximately 35,000 eligible students, the seven universities could take something between 6 and a half thousand students. This shows that there is clearly a case for more universities in Bangladesh.

The government is aware of this demand, and for many years now, there has been a proposal to upgrade a number of existing first-grade colleges to the status of university colleges. In pursuance of this policy already a number of colleges have been upgraded, and by all appearances, this is going to be a continuous process. From the point of view of sheer population- and the population by now has crossed the 110 million mark-there is a strong case for twice, if not thrice the number of existing (seven) universities.

While the government plans to set up more universities, whether by upgrading some of the leading colleges or as fresh establishments, public opinion is divided on the question of establishing some universities in the private sector, there is a body of opinion which strongly favours the idea of a few private universities being established. The argument appears to be that these will bring relief to the existing universities that simply cannot meet the ever mounting pressure for admission. Also, there is belief that private universities may prove to be more efficiently run than the existing ones. With better management and with the spectre of session-jam being eliminated, these may well attract hose students now being lured away to distant shores, mostly to American universities. Worried, and affluent parents, who are now footing the heavy bill of such costly education abroad, may turn with a sense of relief, to these universities. There is no denying the fact that the most potent reason why parents are yeilding to their childrens demand for education abroad is the existing session-jam which threatens to become a permanent feature of our universities.

However, there is equally a body of opinion somewhat suspicious of the idea. There is a fear, not altogether unfounded, that private universities, charging much higher tuition fees, may finally bring about an unhealthy division between the rich and the poor in the field of higher education. To those who hold this view, the division is not a disirable thing from the social point of view. But whether we like it or not, a similar division is already taking place in primary and secondary education, and by all tokens, will now spread to the remaining area of tertiary education. In other words, an unmistakable trend only waits to be institutionalised.

On the positive side, however, private universities may well introduce and element of competition, and an urge for excellence, now more or less missing in our universities. At any rate a number of private universities, provided these are committed to the ideals of higher education, can form a supplementary sector within the larger system.

In fact, as far a the four hundred and fifty-odd colleges are concerned, forming the bulk of the existing system, there already exists the two sectors; private and public. The 1986-87 figures show as many as 295 degree colleges in the privet sector as against 159 in the public. The favoured terms are non-government and government. The situation here points to an unresolved problem for the entire system of higher education.

Till recently, the establishment favoured the idea of gradually taking over the management of private colleges, though on a selective basis. The present figures reflect the progress of this trend over the years. The trend started as early as the sixties, and was accelerated after 1972. There is now a thinking that the process needs to be

The Curzon Hall, Dhaka University.

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checked, if not to be halted. There are perhaps other ways of helping out the financially weak institutions of higher learning than their outright adoption by the government. It looks as if the Fourth Five-year Plan is going to reflect this latest perception about the privately run degree colleges of the country.

Finally, a word about the University Grants Commission, established by a Presidential order in 1973. The Commission met a growing demand of the sixties. It is expected to enquire into the needs of the universities, to examine proposals coming from the government for meeting the revenue and development needs of the universities. The Commission has been doing all this, to the best of its abilities. It has a delicate job to do, that of playing the role of a buffer between the government and the universities.

The Commission is also required, under the Order that brought it into existence, to advise the government on the establishment of new universities. What the Order did not specifically say is that, as far as the colleges constitute a major sector of the system, the Commissions seope should also include them. In the absence of this idea, the colleges have been deprived of something they deserved: the privilege of the Commissions care and superintendence now limited only to a few universities. Perhaps the omission will some day draw the notice of the government , and of those are in charge of planning and the system of higher education in Bangladesh will come under the purview of a single authority. University Grants Commission .

What if the proposed Affiliating university/ universities, as it/ they come into existence, are changed with the same responsibility? Even then, I should imagine, an affiliating university, as long as it is a university, may not remain outside the orbit of the UGC.

● *The author is a former Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University and a former Adviser to the Acting President of the erstwhile caretaker government.*

All About Festivals, From Around Asia

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

WITH Eid-ul-Fitr and Pahela Baishak just round the corner, how can we talk of anything but festivals?

Old folks say that our festivals have lost their purity and original flavour, that they have become highly commercialised and that we no longer celebrate them in a slow rhythm.

The last observation comes from a Japanese friend who complains that his country's tea ceremony is now more a tourist attraction than part of a traditional way of life and that this is happening to many Japanese festivals.

We have joined friends in Tokyo during a few Japanese festivals, like the Lantern festival at the Kasagu shrine in Nara when more than 3,000 lamps are lit around the temple and at the parade of shrine palanquins in the Asakusa suburb of Tokyo. Many of these festivals centre around Japanese shrines and, therefore, remain unknown to visitors to Tokyo. It is, of course, a different matter when the festival is important enough to be observed as a public holiday. A visitor may be curious to know what the holiday is about and discover, just to give an example, that it is called the Adults Day, which usually falls on 15 January every year, when people congratulate young men and women who have become 20 years of age.

Who, among the outsiders, can say how many of these festivals have become commercialised and, in the process, have lost their original character? One significant change deserves attention, a change that suggests that even traditional festivals, at least some of them, are now geared to tourism. Instead of adjusting many of these festivals to the lunar calendar, most of them are now aligned to the western one and observed on set dates. It is said that this is done for the convenience of the tourist who can plan in advance in visiting Japan during a festival of his or her choice.

Such an advance planning is hardly necessary when one wants to see the Christmas extravaganza in the shopping districts of Tokyo. You can get there any time between September and December. Then, all the lights and decorations in Ginza and Shinjuku districts are up, with some fantastic display innovations put on show for cars and electronic goods, which would make London's West End and the Manhattan of New York look like poor cousins. However, if the assault on all your senses does not make you feel a little dizzy, prices will.

So, this is Christmas in Japan which has probably the smallest number of Christians among countries in Southeast and Far East Asia. This is Japanese commercialism, the big business at work.

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IF a festival can be commer cialised, it can also be politicised.

Take this for an example.

In Malaysia, four major national festivals are Eid-ul-Fitr for its majority Muslim population, the Chinese New Year, the Deepavali for the Hindu community and the Christmas. The Eid-ul-Azha — the Bakr Eid — enjoys a shade less importance than the Eid that comes after Ramadan.

All these festivals are observed in the same way as in South Asia and in other parts of the world. There are prayers, exchange of visits among friends and relatives, a lot of eating — and the inevitable shopping.

There is one element that has made the Malaysian celebration of these festivals a little different, almost unique.

It is the "Open House" held by prominent personalities, especially Ministers, for their friends, relatives, admirers, indeed virtually for any one or every one. There is a difference between our open houses here, when we just drop in at the place of a friend for a visit and a plate of shemai and a somewhat institutionalised system that exists in Malaysia (and, to a lesser degree, in Singapore). In the latter case, an elaborate meal is laid out, usually at the lunch time, and the host and his wife will be standing at the entrance, often for hours, receiving each and every guest who may be accompanied by members of his family.

If the preparation for such open houses is elaborate, so is the publicity. While one rarely gets a formal invitation, newspapers publish the list of open houses, with their dates and locations.

A prominent politician, especially if he or she is a Cabinet Minister, is expected to hold an open house — sometimes two, in Kuala Lumpur and in his or her constituency — during the appropriate festival. Well, this is where a bit of politics comes in. These open houses are really open to all. These occasions also bring together members of different ethnic groups to mingle freely and share some food together. It is also the time for the Malaysian TV to take its camera inside the homes of leading politicians, starting with the Prime Minister.

These open houses are welcome to foreigners, especially diplomats, working in Malaysia. Here, they have all the opportunities to build up informal contacts with top leaders of the country. However, for some, unused to the routine, this can also be a little tiring. Once, after visiting three open houses within a matter of two hours where he was obliged to eat quite a bit, a diplomat collapsed in heat when he had just arrived at the fourth one.

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Here, his host was none other than the Deputy Prime Minister. An hour later, the diplomat woke up in a private room in the capital's best hospital.

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THERE are a couple festivals observed in some Southeast Asian countries which this writer simply detests.

The first is the enactment of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ which takes place in the Philippines, usually during Good Friday, that many Christians regard as cheap melodrama at its worst. We had a news picture of one such enactment in The Daily Star last week.

The other one is Thaipusan which is observed by some members of the South Indian Hindu community in commemoration of their Guru Subramaniam's birth month which usually falls in January or February. On this day, some devotees pierce their cheeks with sharp spears, cover their faces with ash and go into a trance. It is purely a Dravidian festival which is no longer observed in India.

Years ago, writing in his column for a Singapore paper, noted Indian journalist, Shiri Mulgaokar criticised the festival as grotesque. "This is one festival Singapore can do without," he said. This produced angry responses from some members of the South Indian community in the city republic. One was sharp and blunt. "Mulgaokar is one Indian journalist Singapore can do without," it said.

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The writer (left) being greeted by a Laotian friend at a Baci ceremony in Vientiane, celebrating the start of the Laotian New Year.

MOST festivals observed in Burma, Thailand and Laos originate or are at least linked to Buddhism, the religion of the majority populations living in these countries. The biggest one which provides a sense of unity among the Buddhist countries is, of course, Visakha Bucha which falls in the May-June period, marking the birth, enlightenment and the passing into nirvana (death) of Lord Buddha. In South Asia, members of the Buddhist community refer to it as Buddha Purnima. (Bucha is obviously a distortion of the word, 'Puja' and shows the Pali / Sanskrit influence on the Thai language, a subject that has fascinated many of us for years.)

There are several other Buddhism-related festivals, observed throughout the region, which are all very gentle and almost poetic, like the Asalaha Bucha which is held on the full-moon day of the eighth month of the Thai lunar calendar, commemorating the first sermon delivered by Lord Buddha to his first five disciples.

In parts of Thailand and in the Indonesian island of Bali, some festivals are inspired by the Ramayana, although some of them are perhaps no longer observed in India. In the temples of Bali, most of the dance dramas, staged for tourists, are essentially based on these Ramayana episodes. Quite naturally, these shows evoke protests from Indonesian intellectuals about growing commercialism which has penetrated the once sleepy island. But, then, how else would the outside world know anything of the great Balinese culture ?

There are indeed small enclaves of Hindu culture, which survive in the midst of Islamic and Buddhist influences. In our modest collection of pieces of decoration, acquired in Thailand, there is a small, one foot high, replica of a "Rath", made of cast iron. When did Bangkok last see a Rathajatra ? I wonder.

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LIKE Pahela Baishak, one of my own favourite festivals of Southeast Asia is Songkran which is also known as the water festival, observed in most Buddhist countries of the region, like Burma, Laos and Thailand. Perfumed water is sprinkled on the heads of statues of Buddha : fish and birds are set free; and children have a great time watching the festivities.

Late in 1959, when the late Pandit Nehru, the late President Nasser and the then Prime Minister of Burma, U. Nu met in Rangoon on their way to Indonesia for the Bandung Conference, they provided the world press with a great newsphoto. Out on a Rangoon street, they were seen splashing perfumed water on one another. It just happened to be Songkran time in Burma.

I have a special reason for looking upon this festival with some fondness.

A couple of years ago, due to a mix-up in my flight schedules, I arrived in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, just at the start of a three-day holiday for Songkran which coinciding with the beginning of the New Lao Year, is locally known as Pee May. On the streets of Vientiane, one of the quietest capitals of Asia, people drench each other with water. With friends, we went out and joined the festivities.

The best part of the festival centred on indoor prayers, the chanting of *mantras* in Pali, a bit of social drinking and, most important of all, baci ceremony which involved tying white cotton strings around the wrists of one's family members and friends.

On the second day of the holiday, it was my privilege to join the ceremony at the residence of the Deputy Director of the Lao Radio/ TV, together with the American head of the local United Nations Development Programme and a couple of other foreigners. A very cosmopolitan and yet an extremely Laotian affair.

As my Laotian friends tied white cotton strings on my wrists, whispered their goodwishes for the New Year and urged me not to take off the strings for three days, I remembered our Rakhi ceremony, when young girls adopt brothers by tying strings on their wrists. My friends were not quite sure if the two ceremonies — baci and rakhi — had a common origin, in some distant mythological past. After all, as a saying goes, we all come from the same melting pot.

This was my last visit to Laos, one of my favourite countries in Southeast Asia, visit that ended on a note of goodwill and friendship, our great assets in life.

What's in a Name? Lots!

Sabir Mustafa

"I Begum Khaleda Zia...." thus spoke the country's Prime Minister while taking her oath of office on March 20. Now, it is one thing for people to forget that the prefix "Begum" is not actually a part of her name. But when the very owner of the name begins to call herself Begum, then things begin to get a little tricky.

The trouble with names in this country, of the famous as well as not-so-famous, is on the increase. Take the case of the Prime Minister again. Her eldest son is called Tariq Rahman which is quite natural since the surname of his late father was Rahman. But oddly enough, Tariq's mother adopted the first name of her husband, Zia, as her last name to become Khaleda Zia. If one was in the business of tracing family links, one would have a hell of job linking T. Rahman to K. Zia.

And what about the leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina Wajed? People, including us newspapermen, continually refer to her as Sheikh Hasina or just plain Hasina. Now, what has her husband Abul Wajed Miah done to deserve such a rotten press? Not only did Hasina adopt the middle name of her husband, Wajed, instead of the more appropriate surname Miah, as her last name, she then proceeded to banish it altogether from posters, banners, leaflets etc. The rest of us simply followed suit.

One name will be written in gold in our history, and that is Rafiqul Islam Miah. Who he? He being the first member to utter words in the inaugural session of the fifth Jatiya Sangsad. Oh that Rafiqul Islam. Still not sure? Barrister Rafiqul Islam. The one who begun his maiden parliamentary sentence with the immortal words, 'I Barrister Rafiqul Islam...' Ukil shahib was adamant that's what he was going to call himself. No amount of points of order from other members of the same trade could dissuade him. But alas, he is far from lonely in his quest to give his name note weight. Take the famous newspaper proprietor and editor Mainul Hossain. In older times, his name would have been billed as Mainul Hossain Bar-at-Law. Today the fashionable thing to do is to convert the suffix Bar-at-Law into a prefix — Barrister. Thus we have Barrister Rafiq, Barrister Ishtiaq and the rest. The fashion had struck old and new, highs and lows alike. So much so, that one state minister began his oath with "I Barrister Nazmul Huda...."

The whole thing degenerates into chaos when one thinks of Dr. Kamal Hossain. He is commonly referred to as Dr. Kamal. But why? If one was so fortunate as to be in first-name terms with the illustrious letter writer, one would naturally call him Kamal; however, if one had to approach him more formally, then one would have to address him as Dr. Hossain. Yes? No. The two extremes have been fused together in our peculiar namespeak to produce Dr. Kamal. But at least he doesn't go around saying 'Hi, I'm Dr. Kamal'. Or does he?

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