

Exams Fail the Test

Speakers at a recent seminar on improvement and reforms in the Education System identified the examination process at schools and colleges as a major hindrance to the development of young intellect in this country. Following on from that, speakers including Education Minister Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury suggested making exams more "attractive" by introducing multiple choice questions. The good news here is that the current examination system has been officially acknowledged as a problem; but the bad news is that the suggested solution is merely scratching the surface.

The real problem is not the type of questions examiners set for inter-school year-end, Secondary School Certificate (SSC) or Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams, but the whole approach to education itself. The system at present is geared totally to examinations, rather than the process of learning. The end result is that performance at the exams have become the sole standard by which a pupil's worth is judged. Within the system, we have placings i.e. first, second, third etc. which, in effect, labels pupils coming below the top 20 as failure or not much better. Such instant verdicts can be difficult for a mature person to handle; for a child of seven or eight, it is a crushing blow to his/her morale. The drop-out rate between primary and half-way up secondary school has already reached an alarming stage, while the rate of failure in SSC and HSC exams — in some years as high as 70 per cent — is a damning indictment of the whole system.

There is little doubt our examination process has to undergo a thorough restructuring, from year-end school exams to SSC and HSC. The placing system needs also to be seriously reconsidered, particularly for inter-school exams right up to Class X. There cannot possibly be any justification for instilling a sense of being inferior in minor boys and girls. Just as important is the all-or-nothing year-end exams. This system actively discourages learning, by inducing pupils to look for short-cuts to passing exams (private tuition, dubious coaching methods, not to mention cheating). A system of continuous assessment throughout the whole year, including homeworks and class performances, can go a long way towards making schools a place for learning, and take the element of fear out of education.

The SSC and HSC examinations need a fundamental change. The present system of having to pass all 10 or 12 subjects or fail altogether puts far too great a pressure on pupils who are really no more than children. A more flexible system, which would reflect a pupil's true knowledge of a given subject, and lift the unjustifiable pressure by doing away with the all-or-nothing nature of the process, is something education authorities ought to engage themselves in devising. But whatever it is, the idea must have the education and psychological well-being of the child as the top-most priorities. Good results will then come as easily as good behaviour comes from well-brought up children. While we welcome the initiative on reforming the examination process, we must not lose sight of the fact that the root cause of the problem is the very quality of education we impart to our children in the first place. Unless we can improve the quality of the text books, teaching methods and of the teachers themselves, our school and college pupils will continue to face bleak prospects at the exams.

Nuclear-free South Asia

The Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif has called upon USA, USSR and China to broker a "regional non-proliferation regime" that would resolve the nuclear issue in South Asia. The measures adopted will be equitable and non-discriminatory based on the principle of equal and undiminished security at the lowest level.

Given the widespread speculation that Pakistan is developing its own nuclear capabilities, the proposal by Nawaz Sharif is a welcome development. We in Bangladesh, and others in non-nuclear countries of the South Asian region can only heave a sigh of relief when we hear any proposal for reducing nuclear build up and, better still, ideas that plan to do away with such weapons of mass destruction altogether.

However, and unfortunately, the situation is far more complicated than we would have liked it to be. To put it simply: Pakistan embarked on its nuclear programme because India had her own bomb. India did so because it feared China, which in turn had to develop its own nuclear weapons against the might of the Soviet Union. The latter, as we well know, had its own agenda vis-a-vis the other superpower, the United States.

Under the Cold War circumstances we could have brushed aside Nawaz Sharif's proposal either as naive or as a mere PR exercise. But now, with the global mood for disarmament and reduction of tension both between US and USSR and between USSR and China, we could perhaps give the Pakistani PM's initiative some serious consideration.

The immediate reaction of the Indian defence expert R Subramaniam that the proposal was a "ploy for resumed US military aid" is typical, and almost predictable. It is understandable that India will have to balance its nuclear arsenal, not so much against Pakistan, but more so vis-a-vis China. The merit of the Pakistani proposal is that it suggests a procedure that involves China, USSR and the USA. India's fears about China can be aired in the conference that Pakistan proposes. It is possible that given an understanding between China, the Soviet Union and the United States, progress can be made on the nuclear situation in South Asian region, by a reduction in the nuclear capabilities between China and India which is the only way to go about making South Asia a nuclear free area. We hope the proposal of the Pakistani Prime Minister will be considered for what it really is — a welcome move.

Of the nine African dictators toppled within the last nine months Mengistu Haile Mariam is by far the most important.

Ethiopia, one of Africa's most populous nations, now numbering over 50 million, was in a state of crisis throughout his 16 years of misrule. Now with rebel forces pouring into Addis Ababa, it seems destined to a bleak and unstable future.

Instead of settling with the rebel factions when there was still a chance to build a stable future, Mengistu resisted them to the last and has perpetuated the uncertainty. His legacy is bitter.

More Africans died under him than any other African tyrant (compared with him Idi Amin was but a toy-boy). His Ethiopian people died in their millions in years of war, famine, disease and purges. Two million are estimated to have died inside the country and three million more fled as refugees.

Mengistu's objective throughout was survival. He eliminated senior leaders who challenged him. He exterminated thousands of ordinary Ethiopians who resisted him. He liquidated political opponents in a series of purges.

He stuck rigidly to an outdated Marxist ideology because it gave him Soviet support, not because he had any deep commitment. When the Soviets dropped him to concentrate on the crisis within Russia, he tried to wipe out all traces of socialism in a pathetic last-minute attempt to build alliances with the West.

He left a bankrupt economy in a hock to Soviet and western creditors to the tune of some \$5 billion. His agricultural and land reform policies were a total failure.

Forced collectivisation was rejected by the independent-minded Ethiopian peasants. Agricultural production fell,

Mengistu's Legacy — 2 Million Dead, 3 Million Homeless

by Alan Rake

After more than 15 years of misrule Mengistu Haile Mariam deserted his tragic country, leaving his army defeated and his people plunged in chaos. His legacy for Ethiopia is one of misery, famine and economic bankruptcy. After tyrannising his nation and forcing his people to bend to his will, he has bequeathed a bloody and uncertain future.

while deforestation and soil erosion exposed the people to successive droughts and famines.

Until the bitter end he refused to recognise the extreme problems of Ethiopian nationalities. When he took

power the Eritreans hoped his new revolutionary regime would give them a new deal, but his response was simply to pour more and more demoralised troops into the unwinnable, imperialist war.

He did not recognise the depths of nationalism that gave rise to the other liberation movements which finally toppled him.

Even at the end he did not go voluntarily, but only when he realised the rebels were at the gates of Addis Ababa. Finally, he listened to the foreign powers pressing him to go in the hope that meaningful peace talks could be held.

An unlikely alliance developed between the Americans and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe who sent an envoy to Addis Ababa saying Mengistu would be able to retire with his wife and family to his Zimbabwean ranch. Realising his time was up, he deserted his army and his people and fled without informing his closest lieutenants.

But even after his departure, his successor General Tesfayia Gebre Kidhan, with US and international backing, could not buy off the rebels with the offer of peace talks without conditions.

The major rebel groups were winning the war so easily

that they knew they could impose their own military solution. The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (a Tigrean-dominated alliance) was poised to take Addis Ababa. The collapse was sudden and dramatic. It seized control on May 28.

The Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front, after its marathon 30-year liberation war, has at last liberated the whole of Eritrea, including its capital Asmara, taken after an 18-month siege, and its two main ports of Massawa and Assab. Other liberation groups are also on the march.

The EPRDF, formed by the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front and non-Tigrean allies, is now in control of Addis Ababa, but it has very different objectives from other liberation movements.

In the first place it wants a united Ethiopia, while the Eritreans in the EPLF want to hold a referendum in their home territory in which its people are expected to opt for full independence for Eritrea.

If Eritrea is allowed to secede it will control both of Ethiopia's main ports (Massawa and Assab) and its main transport outlets to the world.

Other liberation movements also have conflicting aims and objectives. The Oromo Libera-

tion Front representing the most populous nationality in Ethiopia is running a low-key campaign in the west. The Afar Liberation Front is waiting its turn in the east.

In Addis itself a whole host of opposition politicians, grouped in the Coalition of Democratic Forces, are waiting to assert themselves before the EPRDF government can assert its authority.

Mengistu's legacy of setting one group against another, his bloody purges, his hated secret police have left wounds that could provoke a bloodbath as old scores are settled.

All parties say that they want a democratic constitution. They have also proposed that there should be an interim coalition government to handle the transition period.

Even the EPLF is prepared to go alone with this stage, providing they can still offer their people the choice between independence and a form of association with Ethiopia. But a long-term constitution will still have to be worked out.

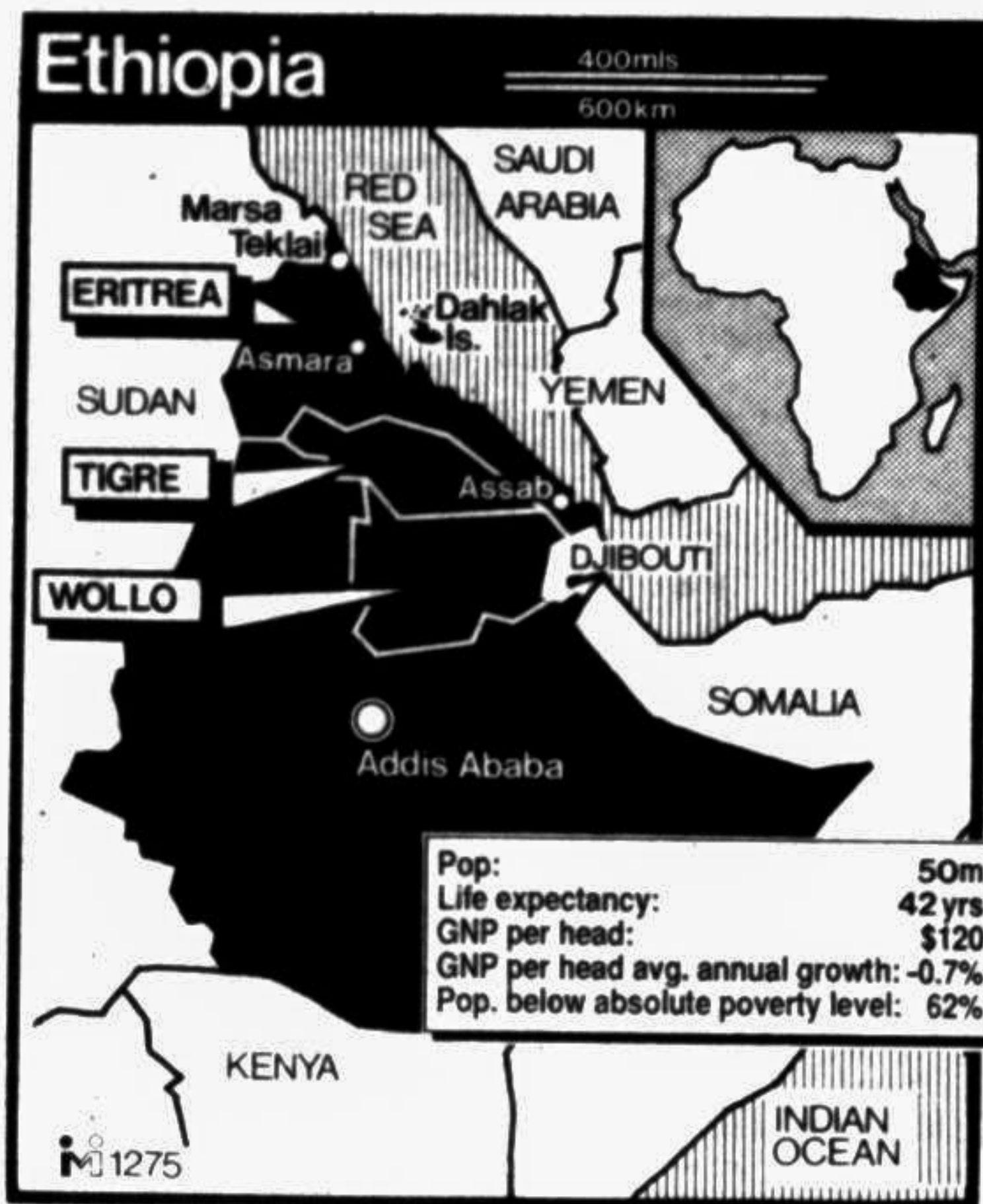
A host of thorny questions remain. Will the new Ethiopia be unitary, federal or confederal, specifically will Eritrea be allowed to opt out? How much self-determination will the others demand for themselves?

Will it be possible to organise free and fair elections? Will international monitoring be possible?

Can a national army be pruned out of the warring guerrilla factions and the government forces? What will prevent a Liberian-style situation developing with rival guerrilla leaders vying for power?

Mengistu has left no answers. — GEMINI NEWS

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The Negros Dilemma: Political Extremism

Rex Burn writes from Bacolod City, Philippines

Caught amidst all the claims, counter-claims and contradictions are the lowly sugar workers

THE Aquino administration has tagged the central Philippine sugar-growing island of Negros its "laboratory" for a successful counterinsurgency campaign which will serve as a model for operations elsewhere against the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its military arm the New People's Army (NPA).

But despite some government military successes, the main result so far in Negros Occidental has been an apparently almost total polarisation of local people into embracing the far left or the far right.

Negros Island is the country's sugar bowl. It produces 50 to 55 per cent of Philippine sugar which, in 1990, was among the top ten export commodities, earning around 2.2 billion pesos (US\$81.5 million) in foreign exchange.

If a viable political centre is to emerge on Negros to moderate the ten-violent social conflict here, it will in theory have its origins in the church, the most influential social institution here.

"The church is never a violent institution," said former Negros Occidental bishop and prominent social activist Antonio Fortich. He admitted though that around one-third of the church's priests and workers support or sympathise

with the NPA. Army spokesman Major Edwin Recabe stressed that the military respected the legal status of civilian organisations, such as the radical National Federation of Sugar Workers — Food and General Trades (NFSW-FGT). "Many members of the NFSW-FGT are legitimate," he said. "However, many of its members are officials have been captured in NPA groups."

Ten cases of such arrests were cited by Nellie Villardo, a para-legal aid worker at the NFSW-FGT's office in Murcia, some 20 kilometres north of Bacolod City. But she maintained that these ten people, tagged as NPA soldiers, were merely union organisers, were not rebels and detained in a provincial jail, five or more than 18 months.

Steve Ligahon, secretary of the NFSW-FGT's Negros Regional Ad Hoc Committee, claimed ongoing military harassment of the union. He contended that on the sugar haciendas "the military sow fear and disunity among union members, who are then forced to attend three-day anti-communist seminars." But although Mr. Ligahon claimed that these workers were harassed because they were union mem-

bers, he admitted that some were in fact NPA sympathisers. A former NPA rebel admitted that he was still a sympathiser, and asserted that when he was with the NPA and they actually controlled an area, "there was no trouble. The NPA built up a good relationship with the people."

But a former sugar planter from Negros Occidental, who said he now lived in Manila but sometimes still visited the province, claimed that when previously cultivating his small plantation he had made a land-sharing agreement with the NPA only to have them renege on it.

"I agreed to give them some of my land," he said. "Then later, they wanted more. I refused, and they burnt some of my sugar crop. They double-crossed me." He claimed he still received death threats from the NPA in Manila.

Caught in the middle of all the claims, counter-claims and contradictions are sugar work-

ers like Bernardo Villarias, who labours on a 127-hectare plantation near Murcia. Mr. Villarias earns 60.5 pesos (US\$2.20) a day when he works, which is for eight months of the year; there is no available work off-season. He is married with seven children. Sometimes, during the off-season, family meals consist only of rice.

The struggle on Negros is being waged by both sides ostensibly to win the hearts and minds of people like Bernardo Villarias. But the struggle continues to be often violent, and assassinations add to the death toll from ambushes and firefights involving the combat forces of the government and the NPA.

In but one of many instances, last February the body of slain labour activist Rogelio Petran was found in Binalbagan, southern Negros, containing four .45 slugs and bearing marks of torture. Mr. Petran, an agriculturist employed by the NFSW-FGT,

has been working in the union's Bacolod office at the time.

A source familiar with the case said Mr. Petran had become known for advocating agrarian reform to workers in the areas where he was based, and alleged that the agriculturist had been killed by members of the private army of a political figure. The source claimed that many people saw who killed Mr. Petran, but that no one dared to talk or he "would be automatically killed also." Police are still investigating the case.

The army has during recent years been presented in some overseas publications as, seemingly, being solely responsible for everything bad that has happened to Negros. But official Steve Ligahon of the militant leftist NFSW-FGT, while claiming that the military wanted to "disband and destroy" the union, took pains to point out that in the view of the NFSW-FGT, "the real threat to the union comes from landowners with private armies and CAFGUs, backed up by some middle-level military commanders who have been paid by the landowners."

Despite some military successes against the NPA, a solution to the conflict in Negros

Occidental seems nowhere in sight. During the mid-1980s Thailand conducted what some consider the most successful counterinsurgency programme in history, emphasising as much as possible a political approach instead of military action.

But the That approach included provision of land to insurgent surrenders. A good number of Negros Occidental's more powerful landlords steadfastly oppose any semblance of agrarian reform.

However, others from the various sectors in the province agreed with the basic premise advanced by former Bishop Antonio Fortich that some reasonable measure of agrarian reform is the only chance for peace in Negros Occidental.

To Bishop Fortich, "it is not the total solution. But at least these poor people out in the hills will go back and till the land given to them."

Considering the merely token results of all land reform programmes begun in the Philippines since the 1930s, the prospect is that Negros Occidental will continue to be a laboratory not for successful counterinsurgency, but for often-violent political extremism on both sides.

— Depthnews Asia

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Railway workshop

Sir, Saidpur, a upazila having population of two lakh in the district of Nilphamari has the biggest Railway workshop of the country. About five thousand employees work here. Eighty per cent of Saidpur's population depend on the Railway workshop. The development of the workshop means the wellbeing of the thousands of families directly and indirectly dependent on or involved with it, besides the national economy.

But, unfortunately, the biggest Railway workshop is being drained of resources day by day due to frequent illegal lifting of rail iron, coal, diesel oil, timber etc.

Diesel oil is drained through the channel linking outside of the compound. There is a coal market inside the Railway market where coals lifted from inside the workshop find buyers. Truck load of heavy iron like engine wheel, damaged bogie components find way out at dead night and then cast and moulded into RCC rods and other materials at some rolling factory not very far from the workshop. Railway's valuable timbers are being widely seen in different furniture shops at Saidpur. So far, I know, no effective measures

have yet been taken to investigate the allegations and check this pilferage of national wealth.

To make this country rich in Railway transportation, proper attention to the workshop is of prime need. Thus I would urge the concerned authority to initiate positive steps to save railway workshop from dwindling down, in the greater interest of the poor nation.

Rafique Agri-Varsity, Mymensingh.

Imam Khomeini

Sir, Since the 3rd June, 1989 sad demise of the great Iranian leader Imam Khomeini two years have passed and during this period many even some of his real enemies have realised about his ideology, love and affection for the oppressed people. He spent all his life for the prosperity of Islam. He heard the cry of the suffering poor and that's why he responded with all his might. He liberated the people of the Iran from degradation of western bondage.

But, unfortunately, many of us were unable to realise and understand him due to many reasons. But, I think it is not late if we deeply start to study his ideal which is nothing but

of a true Muslim back to Islam, back to the Quran. The identity of the Muslim is not a Sunni or a Shite but adherence to the tenets of Islam.

In this context, I would like to request the appropriate authorities especially in Bangladesh's publication sector to translate and publish his noble books so that Bangladeshis may also enjoy their reading.

S. Rahim Ashrakah BUET, Dhaka.

Drainage system

Sir, Dhaka for the last few years is in need of a workable and good drainage system.

When often during the rainy season the roads get filled up to the "brim" (submerging sidewalks or floors of houses of either side), it becomes quite impossible for pedestrians to wade and rickshaws or three-wheelers to ply through the water. The worst sufferers are school-going children and office-going women and men.

Indeed it is an unpleasant scene to see women wait for a vehicle in the dirty water or get drenched by splash of the same as a vehicle passes by in speed.

So for the welfare of all, we request the concerned authorities to please look into the matter and do something about it, as soon as possible. Rains are a permanent part of our weather which cannot be changed. The only thing we can do is to take precautions and measures to make life a little easier.

Sabrina Chowdhury Shantinagar, Dhaka

Rahul and Priyanka

Sir, In regard to Mr. Colin Smith's query in your newspaper dated 5.6.91, I would like to mention that Rahul is the older of the two Gandhi siblings being 21 years old. Priyanka is a second year student of Delhi University and is 19 years of age.

(Mrs) Brinda Srivastava Gulshan, Dhaka.

Museum—entry fee

Sir, The National Museum in Dhaka is visited everyday by local enthusiasts as well as foreigners. Among the local visitors are mostly those who generally come from the country-side, or in other words, the interior parts, of the country.

I am sure even though we do not perhaps keep a count of the daily visitors, it must be a sizeable number. Thus if we introduce the system of tickets, that too of not a very big amount, it will bring in a revenue to the respective ministry, besides, it will also help in utilising the money collected in this way, for the maintenance and betterment of the Museum.

Needless to say that in most of the countries of the world, this system is followed.

Therefore, it will not be anything new, if we too do the same beneficial thing. Specially in a country like ours, where the economy is in a bad state.

Masuda Ahmed Elephant Road, Dhaka.

OPINION

Technological Gap

We who live in developing nations like Bangladesh are increasingly falling victim to the "Technological Gap" which is sending us back in time just as effectively as any imaginary 'time machine' in a fiction. It is just this inability to keep pace with new inventive ideas, mostly due to the prohibitive cost, which is destined to also ensure our continued poverty. This condition is amply illustrated with the words of Pakistan's Nobel Laureate, Professor Abdus Salam who said, "The Third World is only slowly waking up to the realisation that ... the creation, mastery and utilisation of modern science and technology is basically what distinguishes the North from the South."

The letter published in your esteemed daily written by Mr. A. Mawaz under the caption "Opinion — Bureaucracy in the fax age" touches merely the tip of the iceberg but nevertheless shows us clearly how handicapped we are by an outmoded bureaucratic set up still fumbling along in the leisurely colonial style. The need of the bureaucrat to have everything on paper, and this applies just as much to the pseudo-bureaucrats in private offices and organisations, has quite often resulted in computerisation which has had the astonishing effect of increasing paper work rather than reducing it for the simple reason the filing system remains the same. Nobody appears to have heard of microfilm, microfiches or microcards which enable offices to store information in minimal space.

Mr. A. Mawaz also refers to modern technology such as communications satellites which enabled us to see the war in the Gulf, with very little time lapse, by television transmissions, often sooner than we received the news in any other way. These modern technologies have been around since 1969! For us, and nations like ours, it is the cost which prevents us from tapping in to this modern wonder. And, above all, it should be remembered, so as to be able to make the fullest use of these wonders, we must be sure of a reliable supply of energy, for even the shortest power cut can destroy the hard work punched in to the computer. There are computerised telex machines also which permit all the outgoing messages to be sent at high speed at one single time which can be programmed to despatch at night when charges are lower, but a power cut at the wrong moment can make certain these messages will never be sent. Fax is a quick and reliable way to send documents and letters and, as Mr. Mawaz says, is standard nowadays in most countries, but as he has dealt with this in depth, particularly in the context of bureaucracy, there is nothing to add. Despite our size as a nation, our low rate of literacy, and our perennial poverty, our bureaucracy is one of the largest in the world, as evidenced by our consumption of paper where we stand fourth in the list! What more is there to be said?

Sylvia Mortzoa Dhaka.