

Not So Easy, Europe

When French voters said out, by the narrowest of margins, to the European union pact known as the Maastricht Treaty in a referendum on Sunday, both sides in the argument found something to be pleased about. Europe is still alive, the pro-Maastricht people might have said. Yes, but only by the skin of its teeth, the anti-union nationalists might have retorted.

A 'No' majority in France, following the rejection of the Treaty by Danish voters last June, would surely have killed the whole idea off, for the foreseeable future at any rate. A French Yes means the idea of a united Europe gets a fresh breeze in its sails after the Danish disaster, giving supporters of union precious breathing time. But the large No component in the plebiscite result also means that the sailing will now be far tougher than the bureaucrats in the European Commission in Brussels had imagined.

The biggest sigh of relief, as expected, came from Germany which has emerged as the strongest champion of European integration in recent months. That, curiously, has fuelled the anti-union fires in France, Britain and other smaller states. Detractors of Maastricht say that German eagerness for union is proof that Bonn wishes to re-establish its supremacy over Europe, this time behind the facade of monetary and political union.

We may recall that former British Transport Secretary Nicholas Ridley had caused quite a furore across the continent two years ago, by saying that monetary union would mean "handing Europe to Germany on a plate". Ridley is no longer a political factor, but his mentor Margaret Thatcher still is, albeit in the House of Lords, and she is likely to find many takers in the House of Commons if she really took it upon herself to lead an anti-Maastricht charge. John Major, the prime minister, has refused to consider a referendum on the Treaty, probably unsure of the outcome given the traditional suspicion with which Britons view Europe, particularly Germany and France. Major now wants a summit before ratification, probably in an effort to put in some amendments which would make it easier for him to sell the Treaty to parliament.

It is more or less clear that the Treaty, in its present form, has become discredited. Whether Germany and its allies in the French political establishment and the EC bureaucracy are prepared to read the writings on the wall or not, is another matter. For one thing, it is highly unlikely that the Danes would approve Maastricht in a second referendum unless some changes were effected. By all accounts, the Danish government is not even in a hurry to have this referendum before the Jan. 1, 1993 deadline for Maastricht to become effective. Free trade and free movement of people across national boundaries are one thing, but giving up portions of national sovereignty in terms of control over currencies, economies, wide areas of legislation etc. are something altogether different. At a time when the wind blowing from eastern Europe is one of undiluted nationalism, the thought of a Maastricht-type federation may not have been premature, particularly as the union may well leave Europe's traditional worry, Germany, in a dominating position. But Europe may also find that the road back to the fractured past is also blocked, and supremely unattractive too. The big task therefore before European statesmen now is how to balance the two, and alley fears that union would mean surrender of sovereignty to somebody else or to a group of faceless, grey, bureaucrats not answerable to national parliaments. It would be a tough task, but it is something they have to perform if the EC is to progress beyond being just a free trade body.

Educating Working Children

In its penchant for newer names — often renaming of institutions, parks and other public places built specially by the previous regime — the present government is surely on course of setting a record. But after years of too much of exhibition of showy governance rather than true dispensation of justice, people are least interested in changing names. What they would thankfully welcome is the required reformation to realise the objectives. Mere change of the name from Pathakali Schools to Shishu Kalyan Schools has not done, according to a report, any great service to the purpose for which those educational institutions were set up. On the contrary, 26 out of 72 schools have been closed down.

One candid admission on the part of the concerned sources of the report is that the infrastructure of the renamed Pathakali Trust is not necessarily going to be changed. What then prompted the renaming will perhaps go unanswered. There is, however, a naive argument that through the change of the name of the Trust or the schools, a thrust has been provided for better functioning of both. If closing down of the 26 of the Trust schools by this time is any sign, one can only be apprehensive of what awaits the Trust or the schools.

A non-profit organisation relying on its own resources the Trust can manage its schools for the next 10 years. Institutions such as these may have their origin in gimmickry, but once they transcend the narrow boundary to serve thousands of unfortunate children in a manner they have been doing lately, there is no point condemning them to meet the unwanted fate of those 26 schools. Rather than forcing the Trust to reduce the number of the schools, attempt should be geared up to raise their number. That way alone the vast army of working children could be provided with the necessary facilities and scope for their education. Only about 19,000 children were fortunate enough to study in these schools and with the premature end of the 26, misfortune has already befallen 6,000-7,000 of them.

It has now become settled that at this level of our economic development, we cannot enforce the law prohibiting child labour. Both poverty and illiteracy have conspired to retard the development of our human resources. The schools for the hapless children may not provide them with an opportunity to dramatically change their lot, but collectively the nation stands to benefit greatly. Not measurable in any material terms, the improvement over a long period of time suddenly appears remarkable. So the necessity is to evolve the right kind of strategy to improve upon the existing method for bringing as many working children as possible under the programme. It will be a further improvement, if the children so covered can apply their acquired knowledge at the schools for improving their quality of life. On the successful implementation of the programme also depends, to a large extent, the success of the universal primary education.

How to Make SSC Exam Less Hilarious

by Waheedul Haque

STRANGE things have been happening to that most important part of our education system, namely the 10-year schooling or secondary level, ever since the coming of Pakistan. One thought there would be an end to that once the Bengalee people, who formed the majority of that British gift of a nation, and their culture and language would find their rightful place in the national scheme of things. Well, that was not to be keeping the framework of Pakistan intact. Bengalees had to have a separate independent state to achieve that. So they carved out that state with matchless sacrifice and heroism. In the first few years of independence there were very many encouraging signs that the government was taking education seriously. Gigantic strides were made and radical policy changes effected towards realising what has been lately made a slogan of: Education for all.

But, as with everything else, the healthy trend in education made an about-turn in late '75 for reasons universally recognised in Bangladesh. Queer, even eerie things started happening to education once again — and we couldn't make a meaningful move either towards improving the literacy rate or increasing the number of universities to any respectable figure. In the bargain non-secular theological dogma-based backward-looking education was spread at the cost of setting up new schools and colleges manned with teachers imbuing modern attitudes of democratic tolerance and social consciousness and an awareness of the scientific and technological revolution.

Buffeted by all kinds of attempts at half-baked and most ill-advised reforms and violent massive movements against them — education came to mean almost wholly getting hold of the question papers before the examinations and making a brisk business of that widespread leakage — and then wholesale copying at the examination centres. The edu-

cational establishment, by now having been bereft of ideas and interests in educational philosophies and education's role in building a truly civilised polity — rushed to plug the holes that were shamefully showing the hollowness of everything at all levels of education.

One of the results of that rush to a solution of copying — which was but a puny part of the whole disease, was resorting to an objective-question-based evaluation system. And the outcome was there for all to see when the SSC results were published this year. That was the silliest and the strangest thing of all that has happened to Bangladesh's educational sector. All stars and first divisions — and a pass percentage double that of the previous year. The very idea of the three boards of secondary education taking political bid-

aminations revert to the old and tested ways from the very next year. If this is true, the other truth of the matter is perhaps more important. If this has to continue, even for one more time, something must be done to it to lessen the harm it does and to make it somewhat acceptable to sensible people.

Concerned people have been one in thinking that the examinee, in order to pass, must secure the pass mark in the non-objective half required to be written, independent of whatever he or she gets in the other half. That should mean that passing the writing half is a must for passing the subject as a whole. Although this is quite justified a suggestion — one towards which the examinations must be made to move if the objective multi-choice

contained their questions. It was now a matter of hours to get into the head 500 bits of information — with little reference to the subject — and while taking the exam devote full 50 minutes to tick 50 given answers. One never thought life and the world was so easy.

The whole problem lay with the formation of the 'Task force' that devised the bank of about 5,000 objective multiple-choice questions. The paper-setters of the different Boards and subjects were asked to borrow their questions from this bank. This was a wrong thing to do. The task force's questions should have served the paper-setters as something to model their own questions on — and nothing more.

As in the first case of the written part, we do not want

proving the ways of examining the student's state of education should presuppose that some education of whatever quality has been imparted to the student to be examined and that the examinee has exercised himself or herself in the activity called education in response to an urge from within. And this is what has been wanting in most of those that take the SSC exams, or for that matter, any other examination. Then what is the use of 'improving' the examinations?

In fact the defective and anti-education nature of the prevailing modes of examination has been largely, if not wholly, determining the nature of the academic activity that goes on in the schools. The questions in the examinations are the be-all and end-all in the schools — and not language skills and knowledge and cultivation of feeling and appreci-

ation of beauty and values. Then there builds up a tremendous pressure to see that the questions come repeating from a fund not exceeding thirty for a subject. It takes a teacher of average IQ very little work to bring that box of questions out of which the final exam questions must be chosen down to containing not more than 15 questions. That applies too for a student of rather high IQ. A band of students bent on doing good, of whatever calibre, through collective intelligence can very well guess five questions of every paper correctly if not all six. And they do it by targeting not more than the above-mentioned 15.

What education amounts to, as a whole, in the schools is committing to memory dictated or copied answers to some of these short-list of questions. The guardians and teachers participate in this game of nullifying education and all prospects of it in the future years of the student.

They do it with zest. How can they make such an easy job of it? Because there is something fundamentally wrong with our system of education and its evaluation. The boards that evaluate do not teach. Those that teach do not evaluate. Outwardly it is the teachers who set the papers and who mark the answer scripts. The truth is far more complicated. The paper-setters do not do their job according to the dictates of their own education and knowledge. They are made to fall in some pre-determined long-practised line. By moderators or whatever. How do the examiners mark the papers? They too have to follow briefing and not all of their 'fail-marks' are respected — thanks to the 'grace mark' tradition. The paper-setters do not know what the examinees have actually been taught, the examiners do not know that either. They do not need to. Because the questions have to come from questions set in the previous few years and it is known to the examiners that the examinees know the questions and have been taught to or otherwise made to prepare for answering those questions.

This is what must result if you spend billions of Taka on paying teachers whose performance is neither supervised nor monitored — and hardly one per cent of them are themselves properly equipped to do their — both attitudinally and intellectually — thanks to the employing authorities, utter neglect to them and complete absence of facilities and incentives for their development as teachers. This is what must result when, after spending billions, you cannot have either one single bloomer-free text-book or a school book bearing signs of modern enlightenment.

The question-and-copied-answer bound system of education will take long to heal. But a start must be made. And there is all the need to make haste — the bus of 21st century civilisation is all set to start and we can afford to miss it only to our own peril — individual as well as national.

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mark to award and up to what pass percentage should the examinee's papers be managed to — is totally anti-educational and absolutely nauseating. It is things like these macro-manipulations and not the actual education imparted in the classroom and imbibed by the pupil and put to test and evaluation and gradation in the examinations that formed the entirety of education in the nation. To set it all right is a tall order. The very first thing that cries out for redress is the examination farce of 1992. Following is a resuscitation prescription.

We must first come to accept the reality that, however farcical the present secondary-level evaluation system is, or for that matter detrimental to the cause of the cultivation of the intellectual, aesthetic and moral faculties of the tender boys and girls, this system cannot just be wished away in the matter of a year. It is just not possible to make the ex-

isting thing has at all to be retained, put into practice right at this moment this is sure to lead to a wholesale massacre of lakhs of students.

In order to give the exams a semblance of usefulness and at the same time to avoid such a massacre, it is suggested very strongly that no examinee may pass SSC unless she or he secures 10 out of the 50 in the written half of the paper.

The task of bringing some sense into the so-called objective half is no less important. The first thing that strikes everyone of average IQ is — why was there no provision for negative marking for wrong ticking? In the absence of such, even the examinees knew that perfectly random ticking born of perfect ignorance of the subject was guaranteed to give them at least 20 per cent mark and with some preparation it was possible to take it to around 60 per cent.

Then they had their lucky strike. They got hold of all the five hundred questions which

to remedy things at one go. We propose that for two wrong tickings the examinee loses one point. And that time for ticking these questions be brought down to 20 minutes and not a second more. And that it must be ensured that the examinees have no way to know beforehand of the store of questions from which theirs would be taken.

This then is the recipe for making the SSC exams somewhat workable but only for a couple of years by which time the educational pundits will have cooled their heads and devised something leading to better evaluation of the knowledge and skill the students have picked in the schools.

The above suggestions have very little to do with education as such which goes on languishing in its state of total neglect — by the government and by the political parties and all associations of people, by teachers as well as the guardians — and above all by the students themselves. Im-

mental affairs, but also for promoting those for the overall welfare of the country. We must remember trees give us shade, beauty, the air we breathe, among other benefits. If we let them, they could save our troubled environment. In view of these significance, the Government, like in many countries and cities, should ban the felling of established large and uncommon trees, particularly in urban areas. Prior permission must be sought from the Environment Department to axe a standing tree in the major cities of the country.

Yet when axemen went to strike it, this benefactor remained silent, and offered all its material products to them after death, which they loaded on many trucks perhaps on their cruel craze, and rushed to the market for a diminish-

ing foolish 'gain'. History teaches us that it is the destruction of trees, whether by nomadic tribes or by ancient Romans or modern man that leads to environmental catastrophe and desertification. Then the vast complexity of life yields to the simplicity of death. Disgusted with man's destructive behavior towards our most benevolent friend, George Bernard Shaw made a caustic remark in his *Maxims for Revolutionists*: ... 'Except during the nine months before he draws his first breath, no man manages his affairs as well as a tree does.'

The Fall of a Titan

by Noazesh Ahmed



Why could not they resist the killing of this benefactor?

We are more concerned because this Green-Murder took place right on the campus of Dhaka University, the leading

educational and human resource development institution of the country! The University is not only responsible for dissemination of knowledge and protecting its own environ-

A Titanic Raintree fell with a Promethean cry. A great spasm passed through Mother Earth. For several days continued this cataclysmic feat. This happened right on the Dhaka University campus. I was standing near to this destruction site.

The University did not realise what they lost with the fall of the raintree. They lost a moral wisdom. Why a mere tree could have that much importance on moral issue? Because a tree is a symbol of life today. Was it necessary for the University to perish this *Mahavanaspati*? Were they constructing a new building complex on the tree-stand? No. Was it then destroyed because it gave unwanted shade to a particular bungalow? If that is the case, it is a serious offense and an unthinkable shame.

Let me tell the story of this near-a-century-old raintree. This tree species was introduced during mid 19th century in the Indian subcontinent. For the last one hundred years this tree-community is rendering a great service in ecological harmony to our country though the species is a native of South America. At the time of its fall, this giant raintree's weight must have been over 30 tons having a height of about 150 feet. Do we know of its unseen direct and indirect contribution to our life over a long span of its existence? An awareness and understanding of these benefits may help us appreciate the value and importance of a tree like this lost one. Understanding these effects can be particularly helpful to persons or axemen responsible for their destruction unwittingly.

From the dawn of civilization, trees have been a very

important part of man's environment. They have always supplied many of man's basic needs — material, authentic, spiritual and stable environment. They also contribute generously some very important physical factors which we in Bangladesh need very badly. If short trees reduce soil erosion, screen dust from air, suppress loud noises and wind velocity; produce atmospheric oxygen, reduce air pollutants and temper the climate. Recently, the Indian Forest Research Institute in Dehradun and Virginia Polytechnic Institutes, USA jointly calculated the value of above contributions from a full grown mango tree to be Rs 15 lakh. Now you can imagine, what would be the value of this Herculean campus-Raintree which is about 20 times bigger than a mango tree! In another computation it shows that for each ton of wood growth, a tree releases 1.07 tons of oxygen and purifies 1.47 tons of carbon-dioxide. An average-size mango tree in hot summer day transpires about 100 gallons of water. The accompanying cooling effect is equivalent to that produced by five or more room-size air cooling units. You can now easily compute the cooling effect of that fallen raintree which is so many times bigger than the former. In other words, citizens of Dhaka, particularly the inhabitants of the campus must have enjoyed for over half a century the silent offerings made by this fallen Titan.

Under the circumstances, we should make a direct question: who has the audacity to destroy this silent friend of mankind? Where are the green crusaders of our country? Where are the teachers and students of the University?

To the Editor...

Iraq

Sir, Much action has so far been taken through the international body against Iraq for the mistake it had done by illegally occupying Kuwait. Now certain quarters are trying to establish fresh charges against Iraq with a view to making further international sanctions on the already economically crippled Iraq.

We would request the United Nations to re-consider the case of Iraq and withdraw all the sanctions against that country. At the same time I would honestly call upon the Iraqi authority to discharge all the obligations under the previous UN sanctions. In my opinion there must not be any more sanctions against Iraq. Let Iraqis devote themselves in the re-building activities of their country.

M Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor,
Bangladesh Agricultural
Institute, Dhaka.

"Export or Die"

Sir, This refers to your superb editorial under the above caption published in your es-

teemed daily of Aug 22.

It is a matter of fact that our country imports more than what it exports in the international market. This one-way trading practice has virtually caused an adverse effect on the 'Balance of Trade' as well as on the 'Balance of Payment' of our country. The economic progress of the country is said to be largely determined by the favourable balance in each case. But our country seems to have miserably failed to boost its volume of export which is regarded as the 'engine of growth' of an economy.

In the backdrop of this situation, we call upon the Government to identify the major areas of problem for export and design some realistic and coordinated policy, especially on Industry, Export and Labour so that we can survive.

Nitin Roy
Fakirpool, Dhaka.

Govt Accommodation

Sir, It is well known that there is acute shortage of Government accommodation in Dhaka. Allegedly, taking ad-

vantage of that the Directorate of Government Accommodation has rather become a den of corruption. There are officers and staff who are not getting accommodation even after nine/ten years of their posting in Dhaka. On the other hand those who can manage the officials of the Directorate manage accommodation within a few months. Although the Directorate is maintaining a waiting list of applicants, this appears simply as an eyewash.

It is suggested that the Directorate should not only maintain a register of waiting list, it should also maintain a register of those who have been allotted accommodation in the last five years along with the date of their joining in Dhaka. This register should be open to all applicants. In that case people in the waiting list can verify whether people joining offices in Dhaka after them have been or not allotted accommodation before them. The Directorate of Government Accommodation tries to explain away the anomalies by saying that there are some people like private secretaries

to Ministers who get priority in allotment. But there are reportedly so many cases where people not falling in such category are getting accommodation superseding others may be through corruption, nepotism and favouritism.

It is felt that the whole system of allotment should be viewed to make it fair and equitable. As it is, an official who is allotted accommodation enjoys the benefit until he retires unless, of course, he is posted out of Dhaka. On the other hand, there are hundreds and thousands who are retiring without getting Government accommodation.

To make the whole system equitable it is suggested that Government accommodation should be allotted only for a term of three years. After expiry of the term allottees should vacate and people from the waiting list should be given allotment for a new term. In the process everybody will stand a chance of getting accommodation for a limited period, at least.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantt.

OPINION

Not Beyond Repair

The much talked-about ordinance called the Curbing of Terrorist Activities 1992 has been promulgated defying a strong plea made by a responsible section of the press, the people and internationally respected personalities of the legal profession against its promulgation. We were confidently hoping that The Daily Star's leader 'More Questions Raised than Answered' (September 16) was logical, thoughtful and forceful enough to persuade the government out of its too quickly hatched plan to promulgate it. We also thought that Dr Kamal Hossain's sober advice to the President to send the ordinance, which he termed a black law, back to the cabinet would be seriously considered and heeded.

But apparently, shortsightedness, irrationality and maybe a certain motive triumphed over logic, pragmatism and political wisdom. So in an extraordinary show of haste and obstinacy the ordinance has been published in an extraordinary gazette knocking the people out of their wits.

The ordinance has come as an assault on the system of parliamentary democracy, on the judiciary, on the constitution itself. No state of emergency has been declared, but the ordinance has been promulgated ignoring and bypassing the parliament where a bill dealing with the same problem is under consideration. This ordinance looks like a legal weapon made in the factory of the cabinet rather than a piece of legislation passed by the elected sovereign legislature, and is liable to be used against political opponents and innocent people.

Secondly, since the judges of the tribunals will be appointed by the government and not by the Chief Justice, the ordinance constitutes a negation of the independence

of the judiciary which a democratic government is bound to honour by expediting total separation of the Judiciary from the Executive. It will be a mockery of the rule of law by which the government swears whenever an occasion arises.

Thirdly, the people have long been pressing for immediate repeal of the Special Powers Act of 1974. While assuring the people of keeping its promise to repeal the said Act, the government has really been using it. And now instead of repealing the Special Powers Act, the government has given the people an ordinance which could be infinitely more despotic than the former.

Fourthly, the unprecedented and sweeping powers given under the ordinance to those concerned with curbing terrorism pose a threat of curbing the people's fundamental rights and subjecting them to more terrorism. The fear is not unfounded that there may be no 'limit' to the abuse of 'unlimited' power.

What is really needed is not such an ordinance or a new law, but strict, intelligent and effective enforcement of the relevant laws that are already there.

It is a desperate situation like the one in which a beggar finds himself in front of a richman's residence and its fierce-looking canine guard. Facing the danger he cries out: I don't want alms, sir. Just check your dog.

Must the ordinance be taken as a fait accompli? No taking notice of the general reaction the government can yet undo what it has done without losing face. The government is expected to know that 'bad laws are the worst sort of tyranny' and that 'stubbornness is not always a virtue'. The people should not be forced to yell — check your damned dog.

Nafis Masud
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