

Computer Science in Colleges

Ministers are dream merchants, if not anything else. You read their speeches given on the most incredible creations and at places as unbelievable over all of our lifelong days, and you are sure to disembark on a dreamland. Wonderful it would be if half their pictures of society and promises to people came true. Even a quarter of that could raise our people from the mire they are dipped now up to their neck.

The Education Minister has said on Tuesday that 'computer science' would be introduced at the college level. If enough teachers and funds were available, he was ready to take the computers even to the schools. This is a very elevating thought considering educational situation. In fact any college or even school worth its name, in a matter of years, would go for computers if only because the children of Norbert Weiner and Von Neumann — thanks to that prodigy Steven Jobs — have become accessible even to middle-income people, not to speak of organisations like colleges and schools. But here is a catch. Taking computers to colleges and the science of it are not the same thing.

A very knowledgeable venerable retired judge once enquired of his grand-daughter studying cybernetics or the science of the computers, and computer technology at as famous an institution as the Kharagpur IIT, "What makes you to waste so many years and so much money and undertake so much travel trouble when every other lane in Khulna and Rajshahi not to speak of Dhaka, has academics offering computer knowledge and skill?" "If they do not do it effectively, they would simply run out of business," the old man said. The brilliant grand-daughter did not have a ready answer.

There is nothing wrong in expecting that sooner rather than later not only the computers but their science as well would travel to the colleges. But at the same time it is quite true that our overall social perception of the computers — with almost all educated people taking part — is that of PC's being used as word processors and hardly anything more. It is for us and for all practical purposes a modified kind of typewriting or, for the printer, an improved typesetter. College education hardly is the right place for imparting these skills which can be had at any wayside establishment.

Not unlike chess or gymnastics, the computers and even their science are observed more quickly and wholly by the youngsters. It could simply be wonderful if all our colleges were to teach the science of computers as it should be taught.

However, as Dhaka is not the whole of Bangladesh, all our colleges do not operate in the capital city. What is indeed the state of our college-level education out there in the mofassil, or the state of school education that feeds the colleges? It is pertinent to relate the question of the quality of education in general in these institutions with the question of their being able to put the introduction of computer science to good use.

So far no one has talked about the improvement of the education that is being imparted. That was a far more important thing.

Shame for the Society

Bangladesh society is reasonably tolerant, if not creditably liberal. This is the main reason for the nation's overwhelming support for a modern legal system — both civil and criminal. Even in case of socially arranged local arbitration, the judgments given are more lenient than needlessly harsh. Religious orthodoxy, despite its influence on some areas of life, has not enjoyed any favour in the matter of *gram shalishi* (village court). Unlike Pakistani society, ours has ever remained moderate in its view on many religious codes. But sometimes religion is distorted by its half-educated or ill-educated agents only with motives to serve their own interests.

One such incident took place in Chhatakhara village under Kamalgonj thana, Moulvibazar. Reports carried in a section of our local press speak of a barbaric trial, best suited to the dark Middleage, that was carried out by order of a vengeful moulana named Abdul Mannan. The moulana, irked as he was on refusal of his marriage proposal to a young woman whose husband had left home years ago, was looking for the opportune moment to strike. This he got when the woman was married to another man of the same village by her parents. At the trial — most likely to have been arranged and mock — he pronounced perhaps the most sensational of *fatwas* of our time on the ground that the marriage was unlawful. Accordingly, the young woman was buried waist-deep in the ground and hurled at 101 stones. Her husband and father were punished with 50 lashes, according to one report. But, according to another report, her parents were meted out the same punishment as hers.

The different versions notwithstanding, the essential truth remains that the most ghastly and bizarre trial could be held in this country after we had served our integral connection 22 years back with Pakistan where punishing criminals with throwing stones is still in vogue among some tribes. About one thing, moreover, the reports agree that the young woman was planted in the ground and 101 stones were thrown at her. Finally, she chose to end her life by drinking poison and only death brought her the relief she sought.

It is clear that the moulana was influential and held sway over others in the village. He gave a damn to the existing laws of the land. Neither did he consider the humanitarian aspects of the matter. Even if the woman did wrong, it was none of the moulana's business to punish her in the shameful manner he did. He has committed the worst crime against humanity and, more, violated the laws of the land. An exemplary punishment is what he deserves; for as a "religious leader" his action carries meaning for society.

The Child Factor in the Garments Trade

by Hameeda Hossain

SENATOR Tom Harken's bill seeks to use the US market power to ban imports of garments from factories employing children below the legal age. If the Child Labour Deterrence Act is passed, Bangladesh garments will be forced to conform with ILO Conventions and the protective legislation written into its own Factory Act of 1965. Most human rights and women's rights organisations have been concerned with non-compliance of the laws in export industries, but will the sudden termination of children under 14 years from the garment sector alone provide the other conditions to improve their quality of life?

Announcement of the impending bill has sent alarm bells ringing. The BOMEA is concerned with costs. Compliance with it will mean an added budget of approximately Tk 200 more to be replaced each with an adult woman worker. Will Bangladesh thus lose its competitive advantage?

The bill has created more despair amongst the ranks of the "exploited labour" which it seeks to protect. A child's income is crucial to the survival of poor families. An estimated 55,000 children earning approximately Tk 300 to 500 as helpers in the garment factories are faced with termination.

Before the US Senate sets itself up as an international monitor on labour codes, it will do well to examine the consequences of this bill for Bangladesh's garment labour force. It needs to explore the alternatives available for child labour in Bangladesh, as well as to recognise the incidence of child exploitation in growing pockets of poverty including within its own boundaries.

Characteristics of Child Labour

The concern with child rights is well taken but one should also weigh the practical

alternatives. Will the children, after termination, be able to have better access to health, nutrition or education; or will they have to accept an even more precarious alternative in domestic service, brick chipping, rag picking or prostitution? Little boys will have an additional choice of conducting tempos or being sold for camel racing in the Middle East.

The entry of children below the legal age into garment industry has obviously brought in higher profit audits for the employers. Where minimum wages were recommended by the board at a basic of Tk 627 per month, children have been paid from Tk 200 to 500 including overtime. But the advantages have to be measured for the other side as well. The supply pressure from labour is only too well known; it has induced a rural-urban migration particularly of young single women. Many mothers reportedly bring their minor daughters to work because it is safer than leaving them unprotected and exposed to sexual harassment in the basti (slum). By accompanying the mother or older sister the young girl is inducted into paid work which is scarce in Bangladesh.

Most children work as machine helpers, cleaning the threads from the stitched garments, while others are employed in the cutting and finishing section. The work is not enviable, and ideally they should be enrolled in school if the government's prescription for compulsory primary schooling is to be taken seriously.

The enactment of the Harken's bill is not likely to lead to provide a model life for poor children. They will have to head for less viable work. With the first intimation of the buyers' supervision a cleaning up operation has begun with a daily termination of young children. In one day, week before last, five factories from

the Wireless Gate to Mohakhali terminated the jobs of 227 children. On 11 January, from another four factories in Malibagh 667 young children went home dazed because they were told that there would be no pay check the next month. Their poignant situation was expressed by a young boy who told us tearfully outside his factory that he supported his brothers and sisters and his aunt with whom he lived, who could not afford to send him to school. Rina who is only 11 years old, would like to study but her father is dead. Along with her mother who gives private tuition, her brother who earns Tk 2000 and her earnings of Tk 300, the family just barely survives.

The Secret of Success

The growth of Bangladesh's garment industry has been attributed to entrepreneurial skills in penetrating markets. But little recognition has been given to labour's contribution to the miracle of industrial growth. The significant feature of this export industry in Bangladesh is that the value added is entirely on account of the returns on labour since all raw materials, including cloth and accessories, are imported through back-to-back licensing into bonded warehouses.

Its success depends largely upon the cost of production. For the consumer, the price competitiveness is a decisive factor; for the manufacturer profit maximisation is the main incentive. Competitive prices have driven the industry into countries offering low wages. Added to this, pressure of multi-fibre agreements amongst consumer countries has led to restrictive purchase quotas. This is how the garment trade has favoured Bangladesh: moving away from the South East Asian tigers it has at present expanded into the lowest wage areas of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, China and

Victnam.

Almost 80 per cent of an estimated 600,000 labour force in Bangladesh's garments sector is provided by women, because of their competitive wages, slack labour, "docility" and inability to organise themselves. An increasing incidence of child labour evidently reflects the pressure of demand and supply. No statistics of garment factory labour exists (the Labour Directorate has only now commissioned a survey of child labour in 100 factories), so one has to balance astronomical newspaper figures of a 100,000 children with a recent study that estimates a 13.2 per cent of total garment workers being between the ages of 10 and 14 years. IS Chaudhuri and P Paul-Majumdar, "The Conditions of Garment Workers in Bangladesh—An Appraisal" (BIDS mimeo). Low wages and long hours of work are consistently imposed to meet price demand and production schedules. Although in 1984, the recommended minimum wage varied from a high of Tk 5.35 per hour for the most skilled to Tk 3.01 per hour for the unskilled line presser or packer, actual wages were low par, overtime was generally paid late, and working hours went beyond the stipulated 8 hours particularly during peak production season.

Is there an Alternative

The answer does not lie in a frenzied termination of young children from their work. This might be the line of least resistance particularly with labour replacement being so easy. Employers claim that the extra Tk 200 they will have to incur on women's labour may make the industry economically unviable. The costs and benefits need to be examined more carefully.

No one can disagree with the need for Bangladesh to

enforce its more humanitarian laws. Children under 14 years indeed should not be permitted to work in factories. But can we evolve a more humanitarian way of enforcing the law? Already reports from a few factories in Mqakhali (including well-known names such as York or MDM) show that an average of 35 to 60 children have been sent home with nothing but their work pay. In only one or two cases have employers given severance pay.

A more caring and humanitarian approach would be to tackle the issue of the rights of the child from the perspective of the poor child and its family. Here the BOMEA could play a more positive role to ensure a viable alternative: Working on the commitment that child labour needs to be phased out, it could facilitate an arrangement whereby employers in collaboration with employees unions negotiate to replace the child worker with a member of her/his family; this would ensure that the family is not left to starve. Secondly, rather than the present somersault it should plan to phase out child labour in the next five years. During this period working hours for children should be maintained at a maximum of 5 hours (as stipulated in the Factory Act, 1965); at least two or three rest periods should be allowed with a subsidized lunch; to conform with the state's commitment to compulsory primary education, employers should be asked to provide a school room where children can study in shifts for 2 hours.

This is not likely to lead the industry into a loss, because child labour costs about one third of adult female labour. Both rest and nutrition are conducive to productivity, so the management may have a better bargain in the long run. The costs of education can be shared with the employer providing space, government providing books and an NGO

offering its skills. A third alternative would be to institutionalize a programme for child apprentices, where children terminated from garment factories could be inducted as industrial apprentices. Skill training and primary education under the government's compulsory education programme could be combined to equip young children for industrial work. Facilities for training and literacy could be subsidized by earnings from the garment industry. After all if poor women and children have contributed to earning a major proportion of foreign exchange, why shouldn't they receive a proper trade off? Many NGOs are working in the urban sector. But these programmes are a little uncoupled and dispersed. Since garment workers are found in three main cities, it should not be difficult for a coalition of NGOs to set up to develop an institutional programme incorporating health and education support with income generation.

There is no doubt that Bangladesh needs urgently to move from its rhetoric of "development" to genuine plans for restructuring based on social justice. On the other hand, if the American Senator is genuinely concerned with reducing the exploitative conditions of child workers in Bangladesh he should also try to analyse the global pressures which have aggravated the poverty trap. His country has not been averse to our budgetary allocations to military expenditures or imposition of structural adjustment programmes by the World Bank. These are only two reasons for the increasing fragility of the poor.

Hameeda Hossain, co-author of "No Better Option? Industrial Women Workers in Bangladesh," UPL, 1990, is a member of Ain O Salish Kendra.

NEW food shortages are in the cards for developing countries by the end of this decade. Unless governments invest more in agricultural development, "the global food situation is headed for disaster."

So warned the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in a paper delivered at an international conference on Nutrition organised here by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) early this month.

The Institute projected a shortfall of 88 million tons in the amount of food available to Third World countries in the late 90s.

"Only Asia would see a food surplus, with an estimated 36 million tons in excess of its needs," IFPRI Director General Per Pinstrup-Andersen told the conference. FAO confirmed the institute's projection. "The general outlook for developing countries to meet their food requirements by the year 2000 is hardly optimistic, except for Asia," reports FAO in its State

Food Shortages Seen for Poor Countries

Romeo B Abundo writes from Rome

In the late 1990s, there will be a shortfall of 88 million tons in the amount of food available to Third World countries

By the IFPRI's projection, the number of malnourished children will far exceed the target set by the 1990 World Summit for Children. The Summit had sought to reduce malnutrition among children by half by year 2000.

The IFPRI deplored what it described as diminishing investment in agricultural research and development by both the developed and developing countries. This, in its view, threatens the gains made by the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s which saved millions from starvation.

It also underlined the world's complacency about food. "Governments tend to focus too much on short-lived crises while ignoring the long-term dangers to global food security," said the IFPRI.

Dr Pinstrup-Andersen said new problems threaten the nutritional well-being of families in developing countries. For one thing, some 2 billion more people will be added to the world population in the next 20 years, putting extreme pressure on developing countries with already limited resources.

For another, lands available for farming are already limited due to desertification, water logging and salinity. There is also a decline in food production partly due to slow development of agricultural technology.

Considering these problems, the IFPRI said "food crops must increase by at least 40 per cent in the next 20 years to keep up with demand." To achieve this goal, Dr Pinstrup-Andersen suggested

an international approach that "combines investments in agriculture, nutrition and health care."

Renewed or new attention to agriculture by developing nations is also in order to boost employment and income needed for equitable economic growth, he added.

Another suggestion by the IFPRI is to organise a cooperative international research effort to develop new agricultural technologies and to make these available to farmers in the field.

The conference acknowledged the relevance of these approaches. In the World Declaration and Plan of Action adopted in the final session, the participants sought to preserve and enhance the productivity of agriculture and to

create incentives to enable the farming sector to fulfill its multifunctional role as source of food, employment and income.

"Problems of local food shortages should be addressed through a judicious combination of production, trade and appropriate levels of national, regional combination of production, trade and appropriate levels of national, regional and local stocks, with due regard to the principles of an open international economic system," stated the plan.

Approaches to the problem of food shortage should also consider the environmental aspect, according to IFPRI. "Meeting the food demands of the developing world requires not only producing more food by generating economic growth but doing so in a manner that maintains the natural resource base," it said.

— *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.

Junky insult!

Sir, The recently published news item regarding donation of 80,000 second hand rickshaws to Bangladesh by the Government of Pakistan has attracted the attention of conscious people of Bangladesh. Pakistan has phased out the use of rickshaw in several of its cities and those rickshaws were dumped there. These rickshaws have no utility in future in Pakistan.

The news report mentioned that Pakistan Prime Minister during his recent visit to Bangladesh offered those rickshaws as gift to Bangladesh and as a gesture of goodwill to promote brotherly relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan which was allegedly accepted by our Prime Minister.

No respectable country can accept these so-called gift from any country specially from one which has deprived it of its legitimate share in the assets.

We were 56% of the total population of the then Pakistan. And that was the basis on which elections were held in 1970-71. If that was the basis for election, why we should not get to the extent of 56% of the assets from Pakistan, as it stood on March 26, 1971 when Bangladesh was born?

I do not understand what prompted Pakistan to give alms of rotten rickshaws instead of paying the legitimate claim of Bangladesh on the assets.

I think Pakistan, by sending

these 'junk', has also sent the message to us that we (Bengalees) are there where we were in 1971. They also found a place to dump the 'junk' in the name of 'gift'.

We must rise to the occasion and unite under one slogan: "Produce or perish."

M Saleem Ullah
Advocate
Motiheel C/A., Dhaka

"Hell that broke loose..."

Sir, Your editorial of the 8th January on the atrocities committed by the Bangladesh Navy personnel in Chittagong speaks for all of us who have been shocked by such outrageous behavior committed by a force for whose comfort and pleasure we, the tax-payers, pay.

The incident reveals the deep undercurrent that runs in this country whereby a few can think they have the brightlight of doing whatever they wish because of the power that they can enforce. We are marching towards establishing a democracy and we have a government elected by the free choice of the people. This government cannot allow anyone to challenge their authority by yielding arms.

The violence on the campuses and in the streets are bad enough and now we do not need those who are supposed to protect us turn the guns towards us.

Leaders of the society wake up. The time is passing out

real quick. If you all do not join together and save this god forsaken land, you will be leaders of nobody just like we are leaderless.

Akku Choudhury
Tejgaon, Dhaka

Charges for bank draft

Sir, Till a few months back bank charges for making a bank draft of Tk one thousand was Tk five only. But in the last budget it was suddenly raised to Tk forty. Rate of increase is eight hundred per cent. This seems to be savagely high and will discourage people in remitting money through bank draft. Apart from profit, service should also be a factor for the banks. I therefore urge upon the Bangladesh Bank and Ministry of Finance to look into the matter and fix bank draft charges around Tk ten.

Saleh Ahmed Choudhury
Dhaka Cantonment

'Senile ramblings and administration'

Sir, It was much disgusting to read the above captioned letter by Mr Quazi Akhlaque-Azizm of Chittagong in your paper of December 20, which was already published some three weeks ago in Dhaka Courier of 27th November. I do not find any justification in sending same letter to various newspapers and magazine by the readers. Many readers purchase more than one newspapers; certainly not to read secondhand articles or comments, what to speak of letters. I surmise that one more letter published on the same day by you had appeared previously in another newspaper of Dhaka. Mr M Zahidul Haque has developed a mania for letter writing and he has been bitterly rebuked by many readers for getting published

his same letters in more than one newspapers.

I hope that readers will avoid to send the same letter to more than one newspapers which not only damages the respectability of a newspaper but also makes others jittery, irritable and prone to headaches.

K R Zakhrui
Khulna

Stamps on shaheed intellectuals

Sir, The Star report under the caption "Why this Confusion" appearing in December 31 issue indeed brought up an important issue for discussion and disposal. The issue is concerned with the commemorative stamp on Shaheed Intellectuals which has an extension of an equal size as that of each stamp in the set which bears the message inscribed on the Martyred Intellectuals Memorial at Mirpur. The question arises — what to do with the extended part? The postal clerks invariably detach the extension and throw it away and give only the stamp to the customer. It is not known why the postal department had wasted the public money by printing the extended portion.

I think, the extension was probably printed to perpetuate the spirit of our Liberation War and to inspire people to embrace martyrdom for establishing truth and justice and for protecting the national integrity as it was done by the Shaheeds.

Personally, whenever I purchase that stamp I take the whole set and usually put the extension on one corner of my written letter/paper or sometime on the envelop.

M Zahidul Haque
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OPINION

"For They are All Honourable Men..."

It is with disgust and contempt that I write these lines but I would fail in my duty as a citizen of this land, if I did not.

What has happened in Chittagong between the Navy and the civilians is so sick, that it actually makes you physically ill to nonchalant attitude of the entire administration towards the whole affair. I shall not go into details of the incident because we all know what happened in Chittagong; it is not only a shame on the nation but a tragedy for the whole gamut of social fabric, which had apparently collapsed on the fateful day. I would only like to ask the 'honourable men' a few questions which perhaps they will find time at some point to answer. The ordinary citizen is patient and will wait. Whether indefinitely or not of course, remains to be seen.

First of all, would the Chief of Naval Staff kindly think it worth his while to tell the commonman, exactly where he was or what he was doing on the night of the 'incident' and how or why the ratings could get into the armoury before they went on their rampage? And where were his honourable officers? If the natives (in this case the ratings) were getting restless, it was the job of the officers to try and control them. And if they are incapable of doing so, not only should they have tendered their resignation by now, in the footsteps of the honourable Chief of Naval Staff on moral grounds, they should all face the court martial the proceedings of which at some point should be made public. After all, the tax payer does spend a lot of his hard earned money on the defence budget. Surely he deserves an answer as to how that money is spent and who is responsible for it.

Secondly, the Defence Ministry is sadly lacking in coming up with any answer or explanation about the entire 'showdown'. Is it not time they

took time off from their busy schedule of 'matters of state' and did some explaining? Or is the Navy exempt from the Ministry of Defence and it does not feel responsible for it? Would the Defence Minister, as an elected representative of the people, please explain to the people, exactly what went wrong where? Never in the worst days of any dictatorship has such a shameful incident taken place in the country. I would gently like to remind the representative of the people.

Thirdly, may I enquire as to why the opposition is maintaining such a stony silence over the whole issue? By now they should have brought the roof down, literally, screaming and shouting over the mess. Yet, their inexplicable silence leaves us wondering as to the 'rules of the game'. Whatever the rules might be, they are a shame unto themselves and the nation and do not deserve any better. Why has the leader of the opposition not yet gone to the 'place of occurrence'? Because it might be still unsafe? If so, how come she is silent alongwith her colleagues? They are finding all the time, in the world to release rejoinder after rejoinder on what editors of newspapers say about their leader, in some cases justifiably, but do not seem to have the time to raise a right royal fuss about the 'goings-on' in Chittagong.

In conclusion, I would only like to add, that it is the top hierarchy which reflects the basic quality of leadership in times of crisis. Unfortunately, at this point that leadership quality is sadly lacking. And the nation has to suffer as a result. The time has arrived when the nation demands an answer. Sooner rather than later.

P. Haque
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Dhaka