

Time for Evaluating Teaching

All the top people of educational administration — we do not say of education for very good reasons — are for a 'better' system for students' evaluation. The whole of the society, literate as well as the would-be literate, will be grateful for the realisation, although very late, of the need. But the thanksgiving should better wait till people are satisfied as to what the administrators think to be that 'better' system.

On Friday Ahsani Mission, the philanthropic and educational trust, held a symposium on "Introduction of objective questions in the secondary examinations: Problems and solution". And to it the organisers got round the whole bunch of the highest placed amongst the educational managers — the minister, the state minister, the chairman of the University Grants Commission, the VC of Dhaka University and others, excluding of course any and all of those who teach and set and examine papers at the secondary level and intelligent boys and girls passing through that ordeal and articulate enough to talk of where the shoe pinches. From the reports of the deliberations it all seemed to amount to an exercise in how to motivate pupils about the virtues of the objective questions already introduced.

We had previously in these columns called attention of the society to the stupidity of a mode of examination that, everything remaining constant at some abysmal depth, suddenly fashions star-wallahs by the thousand and first graders by the tens of thousands, more than the third graders. We are gratified to find that some of the remediable suggestions that we had made along with that piece of deliberate denunciation have been accepted and the mode subsequently modified to the benefit of both the system and the examinees. Out of that experience we want to venture further and want to remind the managers that it was universal copying and their failure to cope with it that led them to opt for the objective questions and not because this type of questions evaluated the students' capacity for language and imagination, originality and a sizeable core of information any better than the previous system. The task was to cope with copying and defeat it, not to desert the battlefield. The objectives have their in-built potential for allowing the pupil to jump the real test and rake in full marks. And remain as ignorant and incapable of everything as ever.

Have the educational managers ever thought of a 'better' or any system at all of evaluating the other party involved in the educational game? Is there any system in this nation for teachers' evaluation? No, none at all. It is straightaway foolish to want to test the output of a student without caring to know what had the input been. The nation is passing through a most horrible pedagogical situation. Everything that is happening in the schools and colleges or to the exam systems is being done to fit and promote that critically ill situation and not to improve anything in that horrific scenario.

How we remember Dr Ellen Sattar's frank and radical position that if boys and girls have completed their ten-year schooling they should get a certificate for that irrespective of their showing at whatever kind of examination. For the exams are there to test how and what they have been taught — truly a test for the teachers and not of the taught. And how we would love to agree with her.

While the educational top brass are racking their brains to devise instruments with which to gore the young minds, it is time they spent some of their time and energy on the teaching situation which isn't anyhow on a happier stead than the students.

Freelance Writers

At a time when many organisations and even the government seem to be running out of possible candidates for one kind of awards or another, it is good to have a proposal for a new kind of honour accorded to a somewhat neglected category of people — freelance writers for newspapers. A regular contributor to our correspondence column, Jamil Hasan of Dhaka, has made the proposal in his letter published yesterday, a proposal that deserves support from all, not just freelance writers themselves who have good reasons for hailing the idea but also from staff writers of newspapers who might regard what they call, 'our occasional contributor' as their rivals.

If there is some competition between staff writers and freelance contributors, it is indeed a source of strength for a newspaper. But they co-exist, often sharing a common concern for stability and progress in Bangladesh. In this sense, they belong to the same journalist fraternity, but at different levels.

Yet, in more ways than one, freelance writers belong to a category of their own. For many, there is no question of joining a newspaper as staff members. They may well have other jobs with a decent income to worry about any supplementary earning.

Some may be a little uneasy about adjusting to the discipline of a daily publication. And, being senior citizens in terms of age, many may well prefer to stay at home and do their writing at leisure on subjects they know best. In the end, what they come up with may be anything between worthwhile articles to superb pieces. Usually they are written in hand, in complex sentences, often too long to be published in a daily newspaper. However, there are little doubts that when it comes to such topics as the administrative reorganisation in Bangladesh, the weaknesses in the country's banking structure or the use of English in our educational institutions, a newspaper may well turn to a freelance writer, be he (or she) a retired civil servant, a long-forgotten personality from the financial world or a former Vice Chancellor.

For all their work in enriching the contents of our daily newspapers, these freelance writers gain little recognition from the reading public. So, the proposal from Jamil Hasan is both commendable and timely. However, we must consider carefully as to what kind of awards would prove attractive — or even useful — to winners. Our suggestion: word-processors and manuals on newspaper writing. They would certainly add a professional touch to what we receive from our distinguished contributors from different parts of the country.

Iraqis Ask: Does Saddam Do without His Fillet Steak?

Barbara Nimri Aziz writes from Baghdad

The United States-led military strike in southern Iraq has generated further confusion among Iraqis. Some fear the West is planning to dismember their country. Others believe President Saddam Hussein is in league with the West. While the elite continues to live in comfort, more and more ordinary Iraqis are suffering under the UN-sanctions.

not affect the arrival of his loads of luxuries, people assure you.

"We are confused. We don't know what is going on," Saddam's entrenchment, people say, can only be with US co-operation. Why does the UN not insist on elections in Iraq? Feeling is widespread that Saddam Hussein could not remain in power without outside support. And there is no sign to the public that he is weakening.

During the 1991 bombing, top government officials retreated to Baquba, only 30 minutes' drive from the capital, untouched. Iraqis remember that neither their electricity nor water was disturbed. People say: "They [officials] went on playing tennis in Baquba while Baghdad was under siege."

It is suggested this could only be by agreement between the two governments. The same goes for the blockade, "because the embargo does not affect them."

Besides the rhetoric of party speeches and denunciations of Western imperialist designs, the public hears little from its leadership. TV news reports from across the nation are largely sequences of public rallies in support of the President. Newspapers denounce UN resolutions and applaud Baath leaders who vow to resist and overcome.

But why are the market and hospitals depicted of medicines? People do not really know. To many the state of the economy is also a mystery. The government boasts in general about new economic planning, but there are no specifics.

Farmers only know they have no seeds and no chicken fodder and no animal vaccine. Officials at the Ministry of Agriculture and Date Production Association tend to avoid foreign journalists, giving no details about food production plans.

As prices skyrocket and families scramble to pay 30 times more for eggs, meat and other essentials, more and more educated people are forced to leave their professions and take up menial jobs. Thousands have fled to foreign countries.

Many have started driving taxis. Increasingly Baghdad cab drivers represent a wide cross-section of the capital's male population and its economic woes. Before the Gulf war most families in the capital owned a car. It was the sign of widespread middle class comfort and the general prosperity of the country.

Says a 30-year-old Baghdad: "As a civil engineer, I could earn only 200 dinars a month [now worth only \$7 against \$600 in 1989]. Driving a taxi I make 4,000. Yes, this is my own car."

Farouk is an electrician who is now driving a taxi to try and make ends meet. "I trained to be an electrician. There is no work and no parts to repair appliances," he explains, adding: "No one is building houses either. I was in the army for ten years. Never thought I would end up driving a taxi."

The high level of education of drivers makes them keen to talk about politics, especially with foreign visitors. Information is hard to come by. Alternative sources of world news for Iraqis are Voice of America and the BBC.

Students at Baghdad University, like the general public, maintain a deep suspi-

cion of outside news sources. During what people call the "Bush war", foreign broadcasts were misleading and highly propagandistic. They felt. They were full of lies about Kuwait and they highly exaggerated Iraq's military capacity. Later UN newspapers exposed those lies.

Few Iraqis understand the unrest in the Shia-dominated south of the country. There is concern about who is supporting the rebels. How strong is the discontent in the South? Iraqis are worried over attempts by Western powers to add support to some southern aspirations and separate the area south of the 32nd Parallel from Baghdad.

It will create chaos, they fear. With the heavy military presence in the south today along the Basra and Nasiriyah highways and through the marshes where rebels are said to be infiltrating, it appears Baghdad is ready to fight to hold on to the south.

More than five million people, almost a quarter of the population, now live in the capital's vicinity. Will they, they wonder, find themselves fighting on the side of Saddam, involved in a civil war with their countrymen in the south?

Under a crippling economic and medical siege, many Iraqis are bracing themselves for another military assault without knowing from which direction it will come.

Before the Gulf crisis, taxi drivers always turned and said to visiting foreigners: "Welcome to Iraq." Now they nervously ask: "What do you think will happen to Iraq?"

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Iraq: air exclusion areas



Bases used for strike in Saudi Arabia: Khamis Mushayt, Riyadh and Dhahran
USS Kitty Hawk in the Gulf

THE unequal exchange of biological resources between North and South was finally challenged in the FAO in the mid-1980s. FAO discussions led to two shifts. Firstly they treated all genetic resources as common heritage to be freely shared, including the 'improved' and 'elite' lines. Secondly, they introduced the concept of farmers' rights. In the March 1987 meeting of the FAO's Commission on Plant Genetic Resources, Third World delegates argued that if plant breeders had rights of ownership, control and compensation by virtue of labouring for a decade to develop a new variety from Third World genetic resources, then Third World farmers also had rights since they had domesticated or improved agricultural crops, observed, developed and safeguarded that tremendous biodiversity that breeders and the seed industry use as 'raw material'.

Farmers' rights at the FAO were observed through the creation of an 'international gene fund' for the conservation and utilisation of plant genetic resources. Such a fund, it was felt, would make 'farmers' rights' concrete.

Administered by the Commission, and thus indirectly by the international community, it would 'reward' farmers with programmes beneficial to all. Farmers' Rights, as defined in the text of the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources, means 'rights arising from the past, present and future contributions of farmers in conserving, improving and making available plant genetic resources particularly those in the centres of origin/diversity. Those rights are vested in the international community, as trustee for present and future generations of farmers, and supporting the continuation of their contributions as well as the attainment of overall purposes of the International Undertaking'.

The main problem with 'farmers' rights' as construed in the FAO Commission is that farmers do not have a place for negotiating biodiversity rights and determining patterns of biodiversity utilisation. In addition, the contributions to the gene fund are voluntary, unlike royalty payments under IPRs.

While all these models differ in many ways, they share the basic deficiency that farmers and local communities do not engage in decisions about biodiversity, and transactions of knowledge and biological resources; Government and non-government agencies involved in collection receive the 'compensation' for information and resource transfer while local communities stay excluded.

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.

In praise of Saifur Rahman

Sir, The Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman said a few days back that the Power Sector Development would be carried out with our own resources even if funds from foreign sources (World Bank) are not available. This is a very welcome statement and we congratulate Mr Rahman. Recently he has also stated that the World Bank does not always endorse our national priorities. This is not quite unexpected as the perspective and interest of different nations/governments and institutions are unlikely to be identical. However, with reasonable attitude on both sides (Government of Bangladesh and major donors) we should be able to agree to differ. We must work hard and try to convince or be convinced in dealing with the other side.

Keeping this in view, in our national planning we should set the priorities after careful consideration and study, and make every effort to reach consensus at national level involving the major political parties and the people. The way the Finance Minister held meetings with the cross-section of public, business com-

munty and politicians (including those in opposition) encourages us to suggest to him to think about the future national objectives and take initiative in developing broad consensus, taking the opposition and the public into confidence, with a view to motivate and involve them. This is a long term goal which may take time to materialise. In my opinion, is not unachievable with an optimistic outlook. For instance, on the Jamuna Bridge, it is possible that all shades of opinion would welcome a determined national approach to build it, come what may, with or without foreign assistance. Is it unrealistic or too optimistic? Let the Finance Minister and some others take the initiative or at least start thinking on those lines. We recall the bold action of President Gamal Nasser of Egypt for building the Aswan Dam in 1956.

Habib Sadat Chaudhury
Gulshan, Dhaka

Happiness

Sir, Man by nature is a mysterious creature. Once he could live with wild animals in the jungles. With the passage of time, he has reached modern cities, and this has become possible with the help of edu-

Third World at Losing End of Knowledge and Resource Flow

by Vandana Shiva

The current model of a free, unprotected flow of knowledge and resources from the gene-rich South to the capital-rich North and the protected flow of knowledge and resources in the reverse direction is unjust and unsustainable.

In principle the FAO model is more equitable, but in practice that equity has still to be realised by finding ways to reward farmers' innovations without discrimination just because they do run farms, not multi-million-dollar laboratories.

Farmers' Rights
The Keystone dialogue has developed the notion of recognition of informal innovation as a means to further implement farmers' rights.

It is recognised that informal innovations of farmers contribute to increased and sustainable production. However these innovations are discriminated against by policy instruments that have been evolved to support the diffusion of the formal innovation system, in the private and public sectors, both under the Green Revolution phase as well as in the biotechnology phase.

If innovations by farmers have to be recognised and rewarded, pluralism in agricultural development strategies becomes essential. Farmers' rights then become the real effective and active rights of farmers to influence decisions related to the use of biological resources which are their 'means of production'. These decisions include basic questions of ownership and control over genetic resources, patterns and criteria for their development and use, etc.

However, no model yet exists which recognises these rights of farmers and other producer communities who derive their livelihood from biodiversity. The rights of farmers, tribals, pastoralists, herbalists and fisher folk to the biodiversity that they have conserved and used from times immemorial can be effectively granted only if they are allowed to participate actively, not passively, in decisions that have impact on the status of their rights and the status of biodiversity.

The dominant model of a free, unprotected flow of knowledge and resources from the gene-rich South to the capital-rich North and the protected flow of knowledge and resources in the reverse direction is brazenly unjust and unsustainable and needs to be changed. It can only change through a political process which recognises the original contributors of knowledge, and genetic resources and respects their value system. A world in which market values are the only values will impoverish us all — nature, the Third World, and the international community. To keep non-market, non-monetary systems of value alive, of biodiversity and knowledge, and to subject the logic of the market to these higher value systems is the real political task, for establishing rights to knowledge and biological resources.

The recently signed Biodiversity Convention is the highest level international treaty on the negotiation of these rights, though indirectly, rights to biodiversity are being negotiated in GATT under

TRIPs and Agriculture. All these models discussed could be consistent with interpretations of the Biodiversity Convention. None of the models however give effective rights to local communities. It is essential that these international instruments recognise, realise and respect the prior rights of communities of producers and innovators, and do not merely recognise innovation and production when it takes place under the control of TNCs. In the Biodiversity Convention, the rights of biodiversity are the sovereign rights of nation states (article 3). These need to be built on the prior rights of communities who have conserved and protected biodiversity within national territories.

Governments of the South can only be strengthened by standing behind their peoples and their biodiversity and supporting and protecting the democratic rights of diverse species to exist, and diverse communities to co-exist with them. If states in the South join the global move to deny rights and to take away control over biodiversity from local communities, they too will be weakened and will lose their sovereign rights to control over biodiversity to economic powers in the North whose global empires in the biotechnology era will be built on the destruction and colonisation of the South's biodiversity.

—Third World Network Features
Vandana Shiva is a leading environmental scientist in India.

OPINION

DESA: Organisational Reform and Type

Dr M Shamsul Haque

Recently, in your columns, Abu Ahmad described as what should be our concerns not that of the World Bank. DESA's creation as a separate entity from BPDB was intended to improve its financial performance. Separation from BPDB has turned DESA into a commercial organisation. And without making profit a commercial organisation cannot survive long.

In order to bring commercial attitude and behaviour an organisation must have an appropriate form of organisation, which for a large entity like DESA is a joint stock public limited company. As a single unit perhaps it will be too large to be managed properly to attain commercial goals, given the limited capability of local managers. Perhaps not many people will be willing to buy shares in DESA at present since it is a loss making entity. Initially DESA should be converted into a holding company with four/five subsidiary companies. Shares of these subsidiary companies should be gradually sold to employees of DESA and the public in general. The public must, however, be given majority of the holdings which will enable them to...

nics by elected members in the Board of Directors. It may, however, take a long time for these companies to engage sufficient numbers of skilled managers and employees with proficiencies and attitudes and motives. During this period of transition the government will have to ensure a guaranteed dividends to the shareholders. To increase their stakes the customers of electricity may be asked to buy certificate of deposits with fixed interest like debentures, as it is done in some electricity authorities in India. When the private sector (the public) gains confidence by earning dividends and interest from the distribution of electricity, they in turn will be coming forward to invest in generation and transmission. At this stage it is too premature to ask the private sector to invest in generation of electricity.

The point must be understood that commercial operations can best be managed by commercial organisations of the appropriate types. This is certainly our concern and not that of the World Bank alone. Mere administrative changes and orders by the ministry can attain very little improvement in efficiency in DESA.

with performance of religious duties. And conscience here plays a vital role, as it guides him in every walk of life. He who responds to his conscience gets the desired happiness.

A man, who has a high degree of patience and is careful in every step of his life is never deprived of happiness. Without a mission or religion a man is nothing more than a beast. Everybody should try his best to refrain from the harmful luxuriant life and lead a virtuous one to get the taste of happiness.

F M A Matin
Mirpur, Dhaka

Terrorism and the police

Sir, It is believed that police and only police can get all kinds of terrorism stopped even within a few hours, if they wish to do so. But our total police force, consisted of 77 thousand personnel, could not do it. So some questions may naturally arise, such as — why does our police fail to wipe terrorism out? If we look into the situation, we find a lack of professionalism in them. And this is why they fail or don't come forward to take the active step befitting them. Not only this much they must take but, they should also maintain public relation, so that people can help them providing information concerning the miscreants.

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