

## Free Education for Girls

It is nice feeling that the placid rural atmosphere is a bit abuzz with girls swarming the schools in a greater number. Thanks to the stipendiary programme of education launched with generous assistance from the World Bank, ADB and NORAD, the enrollment at the mafussil schools has radically improved. Even by three-fold in some places. All this is good news, because gender-wise spread of education has been highly one-sided favouring the boys here. Less than half as many girls appear at the SSC and HSC examinations as boys do every year, with the percentages of pass more or less hovering in the same ratio. The gross disparity stems from a huge drop-out among the girls, many of whom would not even start schooling in a traditional rural society.

Quite a few things have to be noted about the free education scheme whose first phase has only been completed. Launched in January, it was folded up in June. Girl students of classes VI and IX in educational institutions of 115 out of a total of 460 thanas became beneficiaries under the programme. The remaining three phases of the scheme are scheduled to be completed by 1996.

The first thing that comes to mind about the undertaking is that wards of poor families in the municipal areas, particularly the children of the slum-dwellers, are kept out of it. Their need for education is as pressing as that of the village children, if not more. Secondly, given the tremendous enthusiasm generated by the programme it will be necessary to make it impervious to any fiddling by the rural influentials. Let there be no political stamp whatsoever on it.

The stakes are too high even for a 'blemished' success, not to speak of any messed up culmination of the programme. First, some prestigious international financial institutions are bank-rolling it at a time when funds are a scarce commodity in the World. Secondly, this is associated with the spirit of the Year for the Girl Child, or that of empowerment of women thematically adopted by the international community during the last few years. Thirdly, any derailment of the programme will mean a continuity of the tradition of child marriage and the usual baby-boom in its wake. Fourthly, it can trigger a wholesome rise in the numbers of teachers and schools.

However, the charitable dispensation should not be allowed to affect the quality of education.

## Intellectual Dishonesty

Industries Minister Zahiruddin Khan remarked the other day at a concourse of only philosophers that the country was suffering through intellectual dishonesty. From the 5th century BC dialectician Socrates to the prophet of falsifiability Sir Karl Popper, dead recently, the best of the philosophers that targeted society, were but all very slow and long acting. Excepting Marx, of course. Be that as it may, Minister Khan couldn't have chosen a better arena to denounce intellectual dishonesty than from which he did so. Choosing such a shot at a meeting of people whose business it is to compass all of mankind's intellectual activity and sift from and impart to it meaning — and intellectuality is itself a grist to their mill — should have left no one unclear about who were the butt of his blame. Except for philosophers who would prefer going deep into the evangelical sounding minister's sweeping remark rather than take exception to it.

The Daily Star report of the event at Jhangirnagar University, however, left it unclear as to whether the minister was pointing to intellectual dishonesty as generally affecting all of our society or he was specific in holding a section of our people, namely the intellectuals, responsible for dishonesty. His observation that "they (the intellectuals) have never played their proper role in Bangladesh" makes the latter meaning more plausible. Well, very evidently the minister is a very courageous person and courage is a most welcome thing in our situation. Does he include himself in the fold of intellectuals or for that matter the participants of that workshop — the philosophers? Is Sufia Kamal or Shamsur Rahman, Qamruzzaman or S M Sultan, or if you like Mohammad Azraf or Mohammad Nasiruddin an intellectual? Have these people and thousands in their mould been dishonest? Bangladesh's successive governments had assiduously been at the odious game of corrupting intellectuals and buying up all the vulnerable ones among them. We could only laugh away the irony of a politician calling an intellectual dishonest, if only this did not have in it much to agonise over.

## Brutalising the Society

Nurul Huda Musa, a J C D leader at the Chittagong University was kidnapped on October 27 and tortured. He died as a result on Sunday fighting hopelessly for life for nine days. His death was widely covered by the press. The all-important question of who could have been so harrowingly cruel and blatantly criminal was not left unanswered by the press. But for fear of falling foul of law they added the epithet 'alleged' before naming the Jamaat student wing Shibir as the culprits.

Have we been inured to such violent and premeditated cold-blooded crime to a degree that all in-campus murderers get away with perfect immunity and almost as pious political activists inviolable even to law? The factor of inurement is there — we are hardly moved by such acts of horrible butchery or what they mean to the society and its development. But that only compounds the problem and doesn't make it any easier to handle. The worst part of such continual violation of the dignity and sanctity of life practised as an essential part of 'political' activity is that it brutalises the mind of all society. Let the process go on up to a level and we are done for as a society of civilised beings.

In Chittagong and in Rajshahi how many Musas have fallen to the scimitar of fascist student activists. They have all been done in by the same skilled hands adept in killing by a perverse and sadistic way. The owners of these hands and their group identity are known to all and first among them is the huge phalanx that has been raised to perpetuate a reign of terror in specific areas and then to spread it to newer social vistas. And yet nothing happens both on the government and the social level that can arrest this progressive criminalisation of society. The government is being politically disadvantaged into averting its eyes from the disturbing reality. Can they continue with that now that one of their own bright boys has been felled by the same assailants?

If such loss of life to sheer planned murder is made subservient to political expediency, it will end up in undoing that kind of politics, and very soon.

# Wedding Bells Toll, Savings Take a Beating

be laid on the table.

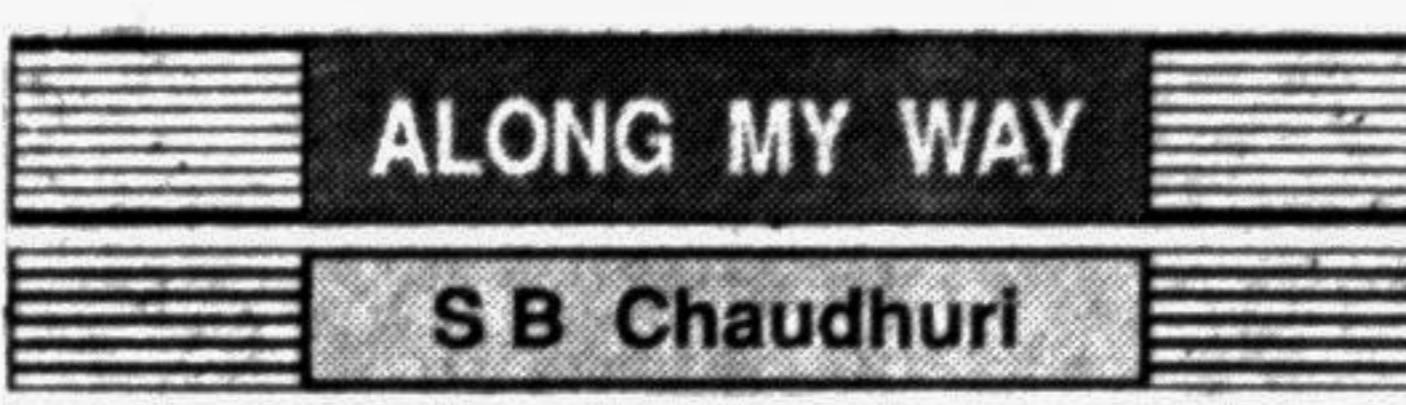
At the main World Thrift Day function, observed last week, the Finance Minister spoke of conspicuous consumption in our society. He mentioned the splash made by affluent people at marriage ceremonies. Nor did he spare the fare served in official meetings. The outspoken Finance Minister means well. But, who will listen to him?

Nowadays, marriage ceremonies linking rich, and even not-so-rich, families, provide at least six occasions for feasting. First, there is the engagement ceremony when the groom's people would visit the bride's house with a formal proposal for tying the bond. Naturally, this is an occasion for gastronomic indulgence. After all, the future-in-laws do deserve a sumptuous meal. Normally, the groom would not be present at this party. Yet, the groom has to meet the bride's people and this brings another opportunity for the two sides to get together. One more splendid meal would

be laid on the table.

Next comes *gajeholood*, the ceremony of smearing the person of the bride and the groom with turmeric, ground fine. The operation would be carried out separately, at the bride's and groom's houses. Both the sides would meet twice then. This function is regarded as an essential preparatory step to the marriage itself. Does the application of turmeric paste improve the complexion of the bride, and of the groom too? Anyway, here are two more occasions to make merry and enjoy the bountiful food. The rich would send special invitation cards to guests and the house would wear a festive look, twinkling lights and all.

The wedding day would arrive soon enough. Guests would troop in, bearing gifts and sit down to partake of the lavish meal set out on this propitious occasion. The venue would be decorated tastefully (some would say gaudily) and lights



ALONG MY WAY

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will burn brightly, if it is evening, in a riot of colours. It is the bride's people who would do the entertaining. In a couple of days' time, the groom's people will have their turn at entertaining guests. This will be the *walima* ceremony, marking the consummation of marriage. Guests will bring gifts and tables will be set — laden with rich, aromatic food. In substance, it will amount to a repeat performance of the wedding reception.

Traditionally, seasonal variations in weather conditions had acted as a constraint on staging marriage ceremonies. The rainy season with its wet days was not considered the right time for a wedding to take

place. The months of winter and spring were usually the favoured season for the celebration. Finding adequate covered space for seating the guests did not present a problem then. In rural areas, that was also the season for relative plenty. Guests will bring gifts and tables will be set — laden with rich, aromatic food. In substance, it will amount to a repeat performance of the wedding reception.

In urban areas, winter is also the season for picnics. Housewives would complain that marriages and picnics have driven the price of chicken up. Things have definitely changed now. People in the urban areas no longer need to wait for the dry season to be able to put up *shamiana* on the lawn or the rooftops for the guests. Marriage halls, usually chris-

tened community centres, have sprouted in towns and cities. There are even mega-centres which can easily hold guests in thousands. All you have to do is to hire such a place, be it the dry or wet season. Marriage receptions can now be held round the year in urban areas, thanks to these community centres. May be, it's good thing for the brides and grooms. They don't have to wait for the right season for nuptials.

Most people see marriage as once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Why not go for a splurge on such an occasion, they would reason. Besides, the money spent on weddings generates income for others also. Jewellers, furnishers, tailors, decorators, florists and hair-dressers, purveyors of food — you name them — they all make something out of marriage ceremonies. It can't be all that bad for the economy, you could even argue. Then there are the makers and suppliers of gifts and video photographers. They also share the bonanza. The more the pomp, the more the earning for all of them.

Most people also think that traditions and customs demand grandeur and glitter at weddings. Of course, there are exceptions even among the rich.

Once in a while you come across a joint reception arranged by the bride's and groom's families together. And usually these are modest affairs too. Even more rarely, you get an invitation card which enjoins upon you not to bring any gifts along. Your blessings are all that we seek — you are told. However, these seem more like oddities these days. The general rule for the rich is to indulge in extravagance on the occasion of weddings.

Well, lavish weddings might generate additional income for some people. All the same, such conspicuous consumption upsets the society's economic priorities. Particularly so, in a country like ours where, according to the Household Expenditure Survey of 1991-92, as high as 49.7 per cent of the population lived below poverty lines. It is a question of misallocation of resources really. Had a part of the expenditure been withheld or saved, the amount could conceivably be spent for a more useful and productive purpose which would have brought a larger benefit for the society. Considered in this light, free spendings on weddings do hold adverse implications for saving, investment and growth.

Thrift promotes savings. Higher savings generate more funds for investment. And investment leads to growth. Conspicuous consumption impinges negatively on saving and by extension, on investment, growth. True, saving by itself may not be enough for sustaining growth in the long

run. Investment does not thrive on savings alone. It also needs other inputs such as infusion of capital and technology from outside, innovations at home, creation of a supportive policy environment, including improved labour standards, and so forth. Likewise, sustained growth calls for not just investment alone but also for positive externalities such as improvements in health and education, physical infrastructure, and so on. Even so, savings remain the critical variable in the growth equation.

Our domestic savings — the difference between the gross domestic product (GDP) representing the money value of all the final goods and services produced within the country in a year less intermediate consumption (those used up in producing final goods) and the total consumption expenditure — are pitifully low. Gross domestic savings rate is said to have nearly doubled over the past three years or so, reaching 7.7 per cent now. Compare this with India's gross domestic savings rate of some 22 per cent and the region's star-performer Singapore's 47 per cent. You realise how far behind we are.

The fact of the matter is, every year we eat up most of our GDP. Despite some improvements, our consumption expenditure takes up more than 92 per cent of the GDP. Understandably, most of it in private consumption — some 80 per cent of the GDP — towards expenditure on goods and services. Nonetheless, conspicuous consumption by the affluent people in the society only helps exacerbate the situation.

**R** INANG kritwa gheretong pibet — borrowing

money to eat ghe (clarified butter) in your meals

— this adage has served for

long as an epithet for the spendthrift. I have often wondered why consumption of ghee was chosen to exemplify the behaviour of a free-spender. Well,

food has always been a source of solace to the people. Rich food is perhaps even more so.

And ghee is an essential ingredient for attaining culinary benchmarks in our traditional cuisine.

Rich food epitomized conspicuous consumption in the days past and so it does perhaps even now. Fine clothes, glittering jewellery, flashy cars — all the rest — would follow them.

The adage I quoted contains an implicit edict against borrowing per se. Economists today would not agree.

Borrowing is not always bad as long as the money is used, not for consumption, but for investment. That also could bring growth. All the same, savings remain the safest and surest way to garner resources for investment and growth.

## Asia Needs Another Rice Revolution

Juan L Mercado writes from Manila

**'If rice output growth fails to keep pace with population growth, people could starve'**

**A** SIA needs a second rice revolution sooner rather than later: to head off a looming four-million-ton deficit of the politically volatile cereal.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has observed that today's ample rice stocks have led to "creeping complacency", although any shortage could be avoided if governments worked on the problem now.

Aside from rice, Asia and the Pacific countries will require an extra 40 million tons of wheat by the early 21st century. FAO's Dr R S Paroda told experts gathered at the recent 18th session of the International Rice Commission. Larger populations, with more money to spend, underpin this spurt in cereal demand.

Planted on 147 million hectares globally, rice provides 35 to 60 per cent of calories on dinner tables of three billion Asians.

Farmers in the region have outproduced their counterparts elsewhere. Yields in Asia average 3.6 tons per hectare, higher than world average, or those set by other regions.

Hybrids are labour-intensive. Efforts to probe its replicability in other parts of Asia have to be stepped up.

Average hybrid rice harvests in Chinese fields top 6.6 tons per hectare. This compares favourably with the 4.5 tons that current high-yielding varieties produce.

IRRI has pinpointed some rice hybrids that have food potential in southern areas of Viet Nam. Experiments in South India show hybrids wresting a yield advantage of one ton per hectare over the best HYVs, a FAO study shows.

Other countries moving to test hybrid production are Philippines and Indonesia.

"Asia needs another crop revolution, capable of doubling present yields, using less land, water and agro-chemicals," Dr Paroda wrote. "For this, research, development and policy initiatives are needed, if we are to meet future rice demands."

— *Depthnews Asia*

## Two Suggestions for the New Information Minister

**T** HE commerce minister, Shamsul Islam, has been given additional charge of looking after the information ministry. There is no reason to envy him. In fact the appropriate feeling should be one of sympathy. He has a hot potato in his hands and unless he can manage to shuffle things well, he can easily get his hands burnt. This ministry does not have a good record of successful ministers. That is perhaps because what he presides over, and what he is expected to do, are on opposite trajectory. An information minister controls the media, some directly and others indirectly. And yet the very life blood of the media is freedom and independence, especially from the government. So a minister is supposed to control, what needs freedom to live. Definitely a recipe for disaster for both sides. However, we believe, that is a doable task. Just as the best government is one that governs the least (meaning — allowing the people to release their creative best); also that information minister is the best who tries to control the least. To what mould will the new minister choose to belong? Can he choose at all? Or is the mindset all pervasive? Here are two suggestions that perhaps help him get a good start.

A discussion of what he can do, should necessarily begin with what he definitely should NOT do. The first critical 'don't' is to carry on the television and radio news in the mould of his predecessor. Please, for God's sake, do not continue these items in the same vain. What was covered on TV news in the name of the so-called national solidarity and revolutionary day last Monday is a good example of what the minister, if he can, change immediately. For the first 15 minutes of the main national news we saw a procession of people visiting former President Ziaur Rahman's grave. The funniest sight was of ministers and BNP high-ups jostling for a place in the camera frame as if to put on record that they were there lest it could be construed as

previous government and the present one, brought extremely uncomplimentary comparison between the two (Recall "Shabek, Bibi, Golams", to the new "Begum and Golams"). Begum Zia's government perhaps did not deserve this comparison. But thanks to the former minister's policy, she got it, and got in large doses.

It is interesting to observe how easily BNP, especially its former information minister, fell into the propaganda mode. This was in spite of all the experience of the Ershadian era so fresh in the public mind. The argument that this writer made on numerous occasions, that if simple exposure on the TV screen actually made a leader popular

then Ershad should have

### The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

also for fleeting moments), was to bring endless shame to the government. Whatever other changes the BNP government was successful in bringing about, the TV and radio news continued in the same Ershadian vain. So everyday, twice, the people of Bangladesh were shown on the national TV that nothing had changed. The propaganda mill was running just as before, and all the government's commitment to freedom of the press and of information did not include the most powerful of them, namely the radio and the television. This paper, and this writer, wrote several pieces pointing out that the most important aspect of any media, both public and private, was credibility. And there cannot be any credibility of a media that does not try to give both sides of the story. When it is only one side, it is not news, but propaganda. So what the radio and TV was reduced to, under the former minister, was propaganda machines, as in the autocratic reign. This, one daily demonstration, of how little difference there was between the

most popular leader in the country, as he monopolised the TV screen for good nine years. Conversely, Begum Zia should have been an unknown person. But what did the election show? Even the stunning victory of BNP did not convince the former information minister that a media without credibility is worth nothing in terms of gaining public support.

The new minister of information can take the view that he is just managing the shop while the real minister is being identified, and as such, he will only mark time. But on the other hand, he can do the country a favour, his own party a favour, and of course, himself a lot of good by taking two simple steps. These may appear bold to some, but I will argue, that is only because we have grown used to propaganda, and have not seen the government media perform any better. Otherwise, the steps are really simple.

First, he should open up the radio and the TV to opposition news and views. Let the professionals of these organisations use their journalistic

preparation of the curriculum to evaluation of examination scripts. The agri-colleges including BAI have been urging upon the authorities to provide academic autonomy to them for infusing dynamism and competition in agricultural education. If we look at BUET, it would be found that BUET had never controlled the academic activities of the engineering colleges or none of the engineering colleges had ever been functioned as affiliated colleges of BUET. Presently, the government has given full autonomy to the engineering colleges and these are no functioning as BITs.

Due to BUET's academic control over the agri-colleges, they are facing several academic problems. We find no justification of keeping these colleges situated at different parts of the country under the academic control of BUET.

The Bangladesh Agricultural Institute Teachers' Association has already submitted a memorandum to different authorities suggesting to shift the academic affiliation of BAI to Dhaka University as the latter's "Faculty of Agriculture" as it was before the establishment of BAI.

Agricultural education plays a vital role in the development of agriculture. But at the present moment the agriculture education sector is not getting the deserved attention. At present, there is only one Agricultural University at Mymensingh which is controlling the entire agricultural education policy. Three agricultural colleges including Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka is functioning under the academic control of BAI as its affiliated institute. There is no competition in agricultural education because BAI is controlling every matters ranging from

preparation of the curriculum to evaluation of examination scripts. The agri-colleges including BAI have been urging upon the authorities to provide academic autonomy to them for infusing dynamism and competition in agricultural education. If we look at BUET, it would be found that BUET had never controlled the academic activities of the engineering colleges or none of the engineering colleges had ever been functioned as affiliated colleges of BUET. Presently, the government has given full autonomy to the engineering colleges and these are no functioning as BITs.

We draw the kind attention of the government leaders as well as the leaders of the opposition, to the above mentioned problems and proposals. We sincerely hope that all quarters will give urgent and serious consideration to our proposal for the greater national good.

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