

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 mufassil 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 influential. 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 discourse 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 Jahangirnagar 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, Qamrul Hasan 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

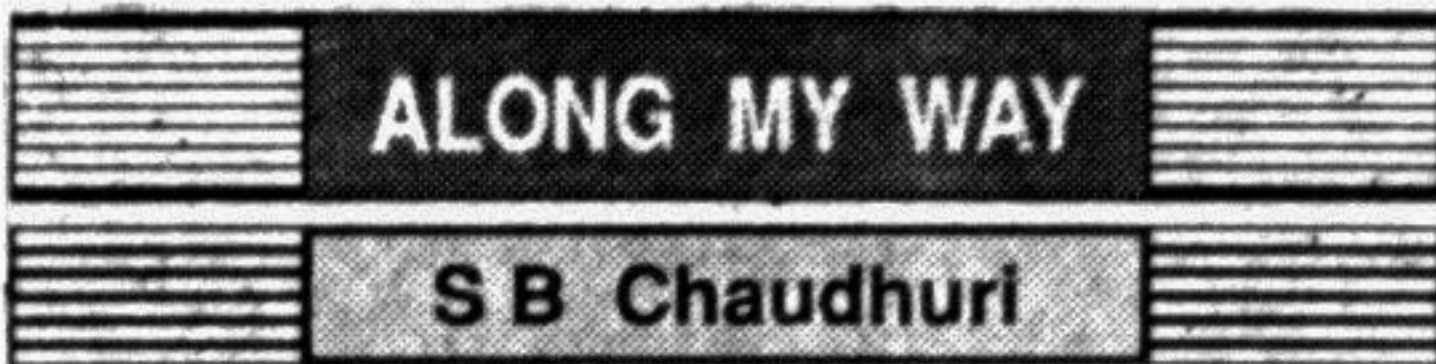
Nurul Huda Musa, a J C D leader at the Chittagong University was kidnapped on October 27 and tortured. He died as a result on Sunday fighting hopelessly for life for nine days. His death was widely covered by the press. The all-important question of who could have been so harrowingly cruel and blatantly 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



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 also was the season for relative plenty, linked to the harvesting of the Aman crop.

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 *shamtana* 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, furnisiers, tailors, decorators, florists and hairdressers, 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.

Thrifty 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.

RINANG kritua, gheetong phet — borrowing money to eat ghee (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 then.

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'

ASIA 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.

"Rice is the only cereal crop consumed almost entirely by humans," Dr Paroda observed. "Rice is a way of life for Asians. If rice output growth fails to keep pace with population growth, people could starve. It is as stark as that."

So far, Asian rice farmers have managed to keep ahead of population. Harvests in this region increased from 216 million tons to over 519 million tons, about 1.6 times faster than population growth.

But the region's comfortable rice stockpile is being whittled away, the FAO scientist pointed out. Costs of input have spiralled. Rice yields in irrigated areas have stagnated. In many places, yields — even in farms neighbouring the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) — have declined.

Arable land is also running out, and widespread pollution and other ecological damage are affecting rice fields.

—Depthnews Asia

Two Suggestions for the New Information Minister

THE 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 it 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 would will the new minister choose to belong? Can he choose at all? Or is the mindset all pervasive? Here are two suggestions that perhaps may 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

their lack of loyalty.

Partymen wanting to gain a point by shedding convenient tears, or crying a bit too hard, and loudly enough, at the grave side to impress, we all know who, is fine by me. What I protest however, is why should the TV viewers, be subjected to this charade. The coverage went to the ridiculous extent of showing long footage of army and navy bands playing on the occasion. We would be kidding ourselves if we believe that such television news brings the government or the ruling party any credit. In fact, it does the exact opposite.

What the former information minister did, by literally blacking out the opposition from the radio and TV news coverage (except on very exceptional occasions, and that

previous government and the present one, brought extremely uncompromising comparison between the two (Recall "Shahab, 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, and 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

judgment and make the two prime time news programmes (Bangla and English) as they see fit. A balanced coverage of national events in the news will at once greatly increase the viewership of these programmes and enhance the prestige of this government. No other single act can get this government as much credit, as can the opening up of the government media for opposition news. If the minister should come under pressure to show more government news, he can start a separate programme on government leaders and their activities. But keep the news department independent, and its operation under professional guidance. This, I say, keeping in view the current political situation. Nothing will create a better atmosphere for reconciliation then opening up the government media to the opposition.

Second, the minister should decentralise government advertisement system. Let the advertisers choose where they want to advertise. In other words, let the corporations or various ministries choose in which papers, and how frequently, they would like to advertise. We understand the government's responsibility to look after the two trust papers. We do not take issue with them. But then there are many daily and weekly newspapers which cannot be found anywhere except in the government files. It is these papers whose government advertisement needs to be looked into. The minister can make an open book of how and where the government ads go, and by what criteria. This step also, will greatly increase the credibility of the government and of the minister, and give the right type of opening signals that will set the minister's dialogue with the independent print media in the right vein.

And please, do not invite us to a meeting for 'exchange of views' which actually means listening to only yours. Or, even listening to ours but with no intention of implementing them. We have attended too many such meetings.

of cinema lovers of today and of tomorrow.

Let us not forget this superb actor, a legend, and his wonderful films. Among the names of actors Burt Lancaster's will occupy, surely, a superior place. At the end I would like to make a request to BTV to show one of his films as a tribute to this great actor.

Towheed Feroze
Dhaka University

Autonomy to agri-colleges

Sir, Bangladesh's economy is largely dependent on agriculture. Agriculture is providing basic needs to the Bangladeshis — food, clothing and shelter. A huge number of people is engaged in agricultural and related occupations. So, agriculture is and will remain to be at the top agenda of Bangladesh's socio-economic development policy.

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 Agriculture 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 BAU as it's affiliated institute. There is no competition in agricultural education because that BAU is controlling every matters, ranging from

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 vein. 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 even 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

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.

Tribute to a hero

Sir, The news that Burt Lancaster had passed away filled my soul with deep sorrow. I stood gazing at the newspaper and thinking of all those spectacular movies which turned Burt Lancaster into a superstar. Memorable scenes and sequences of many of his hits filled my vision. I stood there before the newspaper (with the fateful news) thinking of his enigmatic and charming smile and of course of those blue charismatic eyes which have thrilled and enchanted millions.

The death of Burt Lancaster has created a void in the cinema world. Never shall we forget his contribution. His films are ranked among the best. At this moment the names of some of his best movies come to mind, *The Train*, *The Professionals*, *From Here to Eternity*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *Birdman of Alcatraz*, *Trapeze*, *Elmer Gantry*. He has immortalised himself through his remarkable and outstanding performance. His confident portrayal of a man torn between his duties and his family obligations in the film "Airport 70" points him out as a superior actor. Then there is the famous film "The Train" where Burt Lancaster is

a touch uncompromising young man determined to stop the Germans from looting the precious paintings. In this film he has truly managed to portray the irresistible hatred towards Germans possessed by the French. The Train is considered by many film critics as a masterpiece on Second World War. We have had the privilege of viewing this great film on TV. In this respect we must thank the Bangladesh Television. The Professionals ranks among the best Western films ever made. However, in "The Island of Dr Moreau" Burt Lancaster plays the role of a genetic researcher who has invented a method of turning animals into human beings. This film is based on the story of H G Wells. And though very few people know of this movie, it is absolutely a fascinating film. Through this movie Burt Lancaster proved that an actor who has always acted as the hero can also portray the villain and in a perfect way. If one wants to evaluate Burt, he or she must watch this fabulous but less popular movie. From Here to Eternity is a milestone in the history of cinema. This film has been acclaimed in different countries of the world. Burt Lancaster has left behind him these films which will always thrill the millions