

Not in Haste, Please!

We cannot hurry up with an educational reform which concerns not only the future of the largest segment of our student population but also the destiny of the nation.

All these thoughts crop up when one reacts to the latest controversy among a limited circle of educationists and experts over the new draft curricula aiming to upgrade the free-falling standards at the secondary and higher secondary levels of a non-system of an educational edifice we have got through half-baked experimentation or the tinkering with time.

It is good to learn that the proposed syllabus seeks to build an element of terminality into the HSC stage by imparting vocational skills for self-employment so that the seats of higher learning are not crippling crowded.

The perfunctory approach to a matter of vital national interest is what we find difficult to accept. We don't suggest that the draft is without any merit nor do we overlook that it has been prepared after a thorough study of the secondary education systems followed in India, Britain and Malaysia.

Special Policing

The plan for deployment of special police squads in all towns should generally be hailed. For the stated aim of the move is to specifically address street crimes, such as mugging, and violation of traffic rules.

We do not know how strong the force will be to keep vigil on this as also other cities and towns and how soon the full contingent will be in place for duties. In the past, however, we have witnessed several such high-sounding operations — like Operation Duroj, Jhatika etc — founding on the lack of political and administrative will.

Still the challenge might come from known areas like arming the squads with modern equipment and providing for their necessary training. On both these counts our shortcomings have to be overcome fast. Then there is the question of maintaining the vehicles and equipment in a continuous process.

Soil Quality

Agricultural experts have determined, according to a report, that soil in Meherpur district has become poor in mineral content. The fertility deficiency has reached such an alarming level that crop production is recording a sharp fall.

There has been an aggressive campaign urging use of chemical fertilizers over the electronic media. Farmers easily get misled. They think the more chemical fertilizers they use the better. Actually, the initial result of using this type of fertilizer is startling.

Agricultural experts' advice to use natural or organic fertilizers gets lost in the commotion. Moreover, organic manure has other uses. They are yet to be mass-produced. So what is the way out? Some tested methods can be of help.

FINANCE Minister Saifur Rahman seems to have got it right — there is nothing wrong with a protection budget as long as it is also good for the people and the economy. The problem, however, is that something like this can only be promised, but hardly be delivered.

However, the proposed Taka 247 billion (revenue and development combined) budget for the fiscal 1995-96 — that the finance minister announced at the parliament last week amidst conspicuous absence of the opposition — seems to have pleased everyone talking about it, except, of course, a few disgruntled economists.

Of course, proposals like reduction in corporate taxes, lowering and in some cases elimination of duties on agricultural inputs, and almost across the board reduction of import duties on more than one thousand intermediate raw materials, may lead many to this kind of conclusions.

No attempt, however, is being made here to argue that what is possible elsewhere is possible in Bangladesh as well. After all, all nations and their potentials are different, and if the past records are any

Budget 1995-96: Political Expediencies will Cast Dark Shadow on its Performance

Imperatives for economic realities and political expediencies hardly coincide... Efforts aimed at harmonization of such contrasting imperatives — more often than not — end up in impractical propositions...

CROSSCURRENTS

by CAF Dowlah



their hands? How long the nation will pay for the political expediency of the rulers? How the budget that clearly demonstrates ruling party's political expediency can be claimed to be equally good for the nation as well as the economy?

Moreover, six to seven per cent economic growth will require a big push in our investment rate — it should range between 18 and 20 per cent of the GDP. How the government plans to reach this level from the existing rate of 13 to 14 per cent in a matter of a year, and in an election year? The economy, according to government statistics, is growing now at a rate of nearly five per cent a year.

The proposed budget's overwhelming emphasis on primary and secondary education, infrastructures and increased domestic contribution to Annual Development Program (ADP), however, deserves appreciation. The government plans to spend almost 25 per cent of its total expenditure — Taka 58.85 billion — for the social sector comprising mainly education and health, and 26 per cent — Taka 60.18 billion — for physi-

cal infrastructures, such as roads, water resources and flood control, etc. Pre-eminence of primary and secondary education at public cost should be remarkable in a country where the vast majority live below subsistence level. The government, however, must initiate appropriate mechanisms to make sure that the children of the poor receive quality education throughout the country.

The proposed budget calls for so much tax cuts that one gets almost paranoid about its potential revenue side. Customs duties, corporate income and profits taxes have been slashed one after another — almost endlessly. How then the government plans to finance its operations? Here lies the gimmick of the proposed budget — all the tax cuts — reductions in tariffs and customs duties, exemption of VAT — may result in a total revenue loss of only Taka 3.5 billion while the overall revenue target of the government remains at Taka 113 billion.

The principal source of the Taka 113 billion revenue budget, however, will be the VAT — the value added tax. In fiscal 1993-94 it contributed

42 per cent to the government exchequer, while the traditional top revenue earner — contributed only 33.7 per cent. With the ever widening net for VAT and successive inclusion of excise duties in the VAT-net, this will be contributing about 50 per cent in proposed revenue budget. Although Saifur Rahman knows it no less than others that VAT is an extreme form of regressive tax, he intends to keep the rate high. VAT's burden is awfully high on the poor and low income people as they pay a substantially higher percentage of their income as VAT than do the rich people. In many countries VAT rate is less than ten per cent. A real tax cut could only be effected by slashing the rate of VAT from existing 15 per cent to 10 per cent at this stage of the economy.

Saifur Rahman — who served Bangladesh government for ten years as a minister for commerce or finance — knows it well that the poor hardly matter in budget as well as politics.

Saifur's calculation in this respect may be right, but perhaps he committed a mistake — in his nationally televised speech — by calling upon the people "do not ask what the government can do for you. Ask yourself what you can do for the Government." Of course, he can make such an appeal. But invoking the reference of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in this connection seems out of context. Kennedy's appeal was "ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country." Perhaps, the Finance Minister knows that a country and a government are not same things.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN



Hooray for Hollywood

JUST when we thought that the American people had nothing more to worry about than how many jurors will survive the next weeks of the O J Simpson trial, Senator Robert Dole raised an issue that caught fire in the country. He attacked the motion picture industry for turning out trash which is destroying the minds of our young people.

He hit a home run because, unlike Dan Quayle, he didn't mention "Murphy Brown." There are few people who would take issue with Dole on the amount of violence shown on the movie screen or on television sets. The dilemma is, how to stop it.

What Senator Dole doesn't understand is how Hollywood movies are made. Whether he likes it or not, every motion picture starts with "one-note" writers.

These people make their living creating the plots that are eventually developed into films. Since the best action-writers are constantly in demand, they are responsible for 90 per cent of all the productions that Dole is complaining about.

In order to understand how this process works, the Senator should sit in on a story conference at one of the studios.

"OK, guys, I read the script. It's lacking something. Why can't we have a scene at the end where the hero crushes the villain with a bulldozer against a church wall?"

"We did that in Sly Stallone's last film."

"So it worked. Let's do it again. How many people get killed in this picture?"

"So far we have 67, not counting a busload of German tourists. But we can give you more if you want."

"Schwarzenegger had 86 in his last movie. Let's go for broke and machine-gun 100."

"Chief, I used this in a martial arts picture two years ago. The heroine is about to be ravished by a Sumo wrestler when she kicks him below the belt with the steel toes on her shoes. While he is rolling on the ground in agony she takes the black belt from around his waist and chokes him with it."

"I like it, especially as it gives the girl in the picture something to do."

"Do you remember the Bruce Willis scene when he threw 10 Canadian Mounties into Niagara Falls?"

"Not really."

"That's because the first time I wrote it, it was for a Dennis Hopper movie. But instead of Canadian Mounties they were corrupt Mexican Federales chasing him across the Rio Grande."

"I remember it because it reminded me of the Jean Claude Van Damme chain-saw scene in India."

"I wrote that one, too."

"As you can see, Senator Dole has a tough job bringing Hollywood to its senses, particularly since the same top screenwriters are writing (ital) all (unital) the pictures."

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Aum and the Japanese Media

Monzurul Haq writes from Tokyo

Our experience throughout the period of existence of television in our country has taught us the important lesson that whoever appears most frequently on the screen holds the magic lamp of power

WE are almost halfway through the year, but the year 1995 so far did not show any sign of a particularly good year for Japan. The year of the pig — as 1995 is marked by the twelve-year cycle zodiac signs of the Chinese calendar — is supposed to be a relatively better year in any term. But for Japan that relative positive indication still remains elusive.

The month of January witnessed the devastating Kobe earthquake that left more than five thousand people dead and a thriving city largely devastated. The all-out effort for rebuilding Japan's second largest port city was no doubt thorough and comprehensive. It did not take much longer for different concerned agencies to restore the disrupted facilities of electricity, telephone, gas, railway and transport system. When everything, including country's recession-hit economy, seemed to be returning once again to normalcy, then came the second blow with the continuous rise of the value of Japanese Yen against US dollar. Many of the business companies that started looking forward toward brighter days were once again forced to recalculate their possible future gain and take more cautious steps to avoid any further slowdown. And before there was any chance for that dark shade to disappear came the latest shock, most unthinkable so far for Japan. Yes, it is the Sarin gas incident at Tokyo subway train in the morning pick hour of 20 March. The poison gas attack and subsequent development related to the incident eventually directed public attention toward one possible perpetrator — the religious sect Aum Shinrikyo. The sect itself and its cult leader Shoko Asahara overnight became a media celebrity not for doing something praiseworthy, but precisely for doing things considered to be very wrong. Almost two months after the incident Japan seems to be still under deep traumatic shock if not the public in general, then of course the Japanese media is.

Japanese mass media, specially the country's different television stations, are not finding it at all difficult these days to fill up their transmission-time. Aum has opened the door of great opportunities for the producers who are not hesitating at all to utilise everything that is being provided to them. Every since suspicion started to centre around the religious sect Aum Shinrikyo, it is not only the Japanese police who started the onslaught against the group, but parallelly seven different channels of Japanese television also launched their somewhat confused campaign against the same suspected culprit. As a result, forgotten are Kobe, dollar's continuing slide, US-Japan trade dispute and all other important issues.

And in the confusion of identifying the offenders, the Black Box has gone under virtual control of no body else but the Aum Shinrikyo and its leader Shoko Asahara. We, the people of Bangladesh, are much aware of the importance of controlling the Black Box. Our experience throughout the period of existence of television in our country has taught us the important lesson that whoever appears most frequently on the screen holds the magic lamp of power and importance in his or her own hand. Ever since television was introduced in our region in 1964, we had gone through a long process of military dictatorship and military democracy. Except for a brief spell during the early 70s, the process continued uninterrupted for almost three decades until it finally came to an end in 1991. Nevertheless, it left such a strong legacy that we are still a long way from thinking democratically about the Black Box. For us the Master of the Day is the person who appears most frequently on TV screen. And may be from such an understanding which unconsciously flows deep inside our mind, we psychologically feel a strong reluctance to allow any of our opponents to appear on the same screen. That is why no one else except the Master and his humble followers can be seen on TV screen. Our eyes have become used to this practice and we probably consider it something as granted.

Now, just try to imagine this probability: A Bangladeshi young man, with his heart and mind tuned to the pre set idea about the Black Box, the idea that has been formulated from practical experiences since his childhood that he spent under military dictatorship and military democracy, comes to

Japan for a short visit during one of these recent days. There is a strong possibility that he might return with a very wrong idea about Japan. The wrong assumption will be that, it is not Tomiichi Murayama who is the leading figure of present day Japanese governmental politics, but a fat, rather unimpressive bearded man wearing a strange dress and eyes half closed is ruling the country with a microphone in hand. Yes, he is Shoko Asahara, the fugitive spiritual leader of the religious sect Aum Shinrikyo.

Since the 20 March incident of Sarin poisoning at the subway trains, Japanese media is continuing to give extensive coverage of every details of Aums activities. There is not a single day when someone from the sect, or some expert explaining the motives of the sect, is not present on the TV screen. Since Shoko Asahara himself has gone into hideout, television stations are not in a position to find out recent footage of his activities. As a result, most of the channels are running the old pictures of Asahara meditating or speaking to his followers holding a microphone in his hand. The same pictures of Asahara are being broadcast by all the channels repeatedly. Forgotten is Tomiichi Murayama, forgotten also is the opposition leader, one-time prime minister with polka-dot necktie Toshiki Kaifu, and gone into oblivion the strong man in Japanese politics Ichiro Ozawa. So, if our hypothetical Bangladeshi youth returns with a very wrong idea about Japan, do not blame him outrightly. Rather blame our own legacy of military dictatorship and military democracy, and also the media that easily turns a villain into a national hero.

To the Editor...

Muslim ICS officers

Sir, The only Muslim ICS (Indian Civil Service) officer from Bengal that I know of was Mr TIM (Tajul Islam Mohammad) Nurunnabi Chowdhury of Gaibandha, who joined the service on the 1st November, 1921 for the Presidency of Fort William of Bengal and the East Indies. His "Covenant", with a forwarding letter from T M Steven Esq ICS, the then Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated 14th February, 1922, is available for reference, if necessary.

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Well done DCC

Sir, Who would bell the cat? The long standing problem has at last been solved. We congratulate the DCC for evicting the unauthorised bus terminal from the busy and crowded Fakirpool Road. Well done DCC. We all feel a sigh of relief. It is now also confirmed that DCC is over all responsible for the administration of the public road. The DCC would make policy decision and the DMP would help implement the decision.

The eviction of illegal Fakirpool bus terminal is not the end itself. Let now the DCC make decision, phase-wise, one after another and help mitigate the sufferings of the people in respect of Dhaka's knotty and dirty traffic problem.

add a few lines to this context. Mr Mujibur Rahman was one of the meritorious and distinguished Bengali Muslims whose Academic feats from the very school life kept pace in distinction of merits with his Hindu counterparts. A wizard of a mathematician among the Muslims his nomination for the ICS was a token of respect from Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee. But the only confusion is whether he hailed from Urdu dominated Muslim community of West Bengal?

Mr Akhtaruzzaman holds the proud distinction of being the only Muslim ICS on competition. Mr K G Morshed, Mr Nurun Nabi and Mr Alamgir Kabir were all officers of high calibre but their nomination lied on the recommendation of certain influential Muslim family.

A senior citizen Dhaka

Muslim ICS officers

Sir, This is in reference to the letter of Absana Begum published in your daily on 14th June '95. I would like to

After successful operation of Fakirpool area the part of Dhaka-Narayanganj road from Folder Street, Wari-Jai Kali

O H Kabir Dhaka