FOCUS

Dedicated to the Distressed : Sandhani

by Lavina Ambreen Ahmed

IN Bangladesh, Sandhani needs no introduction. The voluntary medical students' organisation, constantly on the look out for blood and posthumous eye donors, has long since captured our attention. In fact, it is probably one of the very few student institutions in the country to do positive humanitarian work. Recently, it has received recognition from abroad for its commendable efforts.

'Sandhani' has been selected for the 'Commonwealth Youth Service Award, 1995', as one of the six winners from the six zones of the Commonwealth countries. This award is given to a group of young people for contribution in social work.

A visit to Sandhani's Dhaka Medical College (DMC) unit gives insight into the organisation. The members present there earnestly explain Sandhani's activities and objectives.

Formed in 1977 by six conscious individuals in Dhaka, Sandhani is the pioneer of the voluntary blood and posthumous eye donation movement in Bangladesh. The name 'Sandhani' (seeker) is apt for the dedicated group, working untiringly for society's less privileged. Sandhani has nine units altogether, one at each medical college. There is a central committee comprising 27 members, and three members from each college represent their branch.

Since its inception, Sandhani has come a long way. Mainly, its job is two-fold, organising (a) blood and (b) eye donation programmes. To make these projects successful, proper motivation is essential. After all, the local population seldom show alacrity and concern, when it comes to donating blood, let alone eyes, of their own free will. Sandhani's job is to persuade the masses and highlight the importance of the matter. Posters, leaflets, booklets, stickers as well as media, both print and electronic, are used to encourage the public.

First, let's take into account Sandhani's top-most priority — blood collection. "There are three kinds of blood donors — relatives of those in need, voluntary donors, who don't expect any monetary incentive in return, and the infamous professional ones who sell blood in exchange for cash", informs Dipankar Lodh, International Affairs secretary of Sandhani's Central Committee.

Usually people from the lower class, like day labourers, rickshaw pullers and the unemployed, belong in the third category. As the necessary amount of blood is not received through voluntary donors alone, the professional donors enter the scene.

"Blood is bought from them at Tk 200 to Tk 800 or more, depending on the lateness of hour and on emergency cases," explains Rafique Islam, president, Sandhani, DMC unit. He adds that negative blood costs more. The professional donors are rumoured to be found on the DMC premises at all times. Sure enough, when I went to check this fact, I came across some men squatting in the room. They reminded me of the hapless Hasari Pal of 'The City of Joy'— desperate, forlorn and poverty-stricken. Sandhani members briefed me that they would be uncooperative and wary of strangers. And as it turned out, the reticent bunch declared itself as 'hospital staff and denied involvement in the blood trade. Pretty soon, I found that statement to be false.

In any case, isn't it risky to use the blood of these mercenary donors? "Yes", the would-be-doctors confirm. "Besides the fact that due to poverty and malnutrition, their blood is often of low quality, there is the far more serious fear of blood-borne diseases like hepatitis-B and AIDS," they tell me. Incidentally, some of the pro donors have already been tested HIV positive. It is quite disconcerting to know that these 'life savers' are at the same time helping in spreading these fatal diseases.

To motivate the public, Sandhani gives the voluntary donor a card which entitles him/her to get the equal amount of blood, during times of emergency. Sandhani carries out regular blood donation programmes, even on short notice. The yearly requirement of blood is approximately 2 lakh bags. Sandhani manages to collect 12,000 bags, says the president.

What is the people's response regarding their activities? "Quite good", they reply. Normally, any healthy person from 18-57 can donate blood and 75 to 80 per cent of the donors are students. However, as the International Affairs secretary points out, the student turnout of Dhaka University at Sandhani's programmes is quite disappointing. They get better response from college students and also from the Metropolitan police.

Interestingly enough, Sandhani has organised successful blood collection programmes at the Central Jail. The prisoners are enthusiastic about donating blood. No, they don't get overwhelmed by 'guilt' or 'humanity' to save lives. There is a catch. They get one month remission if they respond to Sandhani's call, which ironically happens to be the reason why the jail authorities are often reluctant about granting them permission too many times. "Bangladeshis are emotional," comments an ex-Sandhani president. "During disaster and tragedy the response we get from the common people is unbelievable; sometimes we get more willing donors than the required amount of blood," he adds.

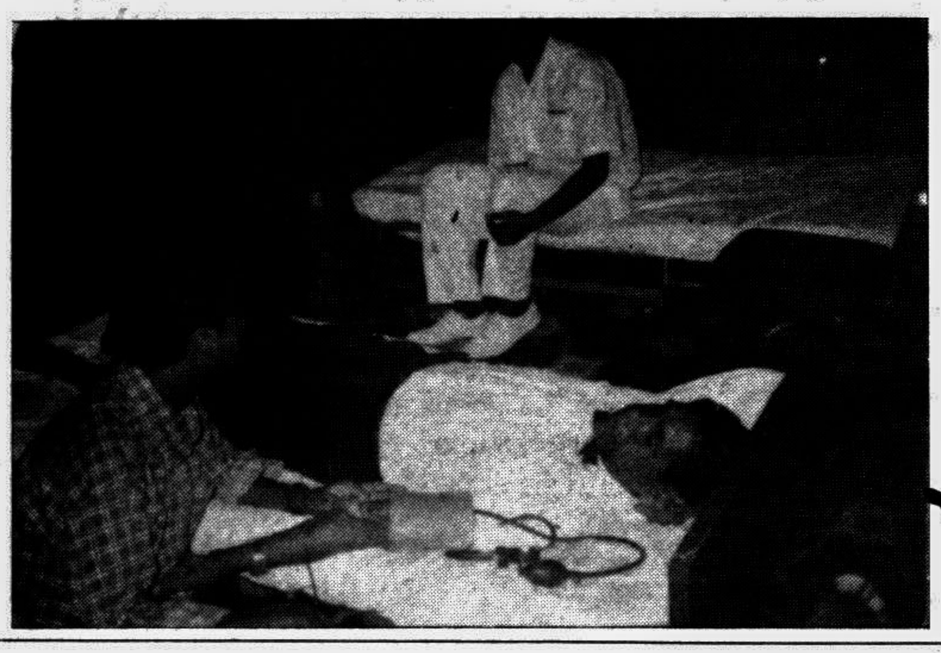
The eye donation project operated by the student institution is also praiseworthy. Launched in 1985, Sandhani is (as mentioned previously) the first organisation to take the initiative of starting post-humous eye donation campaigns in the country. Sandhani statistics reveal that there are approximately one million blind people in Bangladesh. Seventy per cent of the cases are said to be caused by corneal opacity. Vision can be returned through corneal grafting. According to Sandhani's recent update, 681 cornea have been collected and 620 graftings done so far. Usually people from the lower income groups are the major recipients of cornea.

Sandhani also boasts a drug bank which provides essential life saving drugs for the poor and the helpless patients of the hospitals, free of cost. In times of natural calamities like flood, cyclones, tornados, it regularly sends medical units and relief teams to affected areas. In the disastrous cyclone on the 29th of April, 1991, Sandhani was right there to help the distressed. In 1992 the group assisted about 3500 patients by distributing medicines and surgical items. Since 1983, it has also been carrying out immunization and primary health education programmes in certain schools in Dhaka and Mymensingh. Sandhani Chittagong Medical College unit in joint collaboration with a foreign NGO has set up several cyclone shelters and schools along the coastal belt of Bangladesh. Among other welfare activities, it grants scholarships to meritorious but poor medical students.

Besides this year's Commonwealth Youth Service Award, Sandhani has received national recognition in 1992, and has also obtained the Rear Admiral M H Khan Award and the Asafuddowla Memorial Award for its noble deeds. To commemorate its first blood donation event held on November 2, 1978, a week-long blood collection programme has been introduced from last year. Its future agenda includes working on a 'vital organ' donation venture.

Despite its achievements, Sandhani has some worries too, financial constraint being the number one problem. Mainly the members, as well as some philanthropic organisations, contribute to its cause. But to realise its various projects it is in need of monetary assistance, necessary equipment, proper training and so on. In addition, it is not exactly easy for the student physicians to keep up with Sandhani's activities along with their studies. Yet, 'the show must go on', the committed workers believe.

Sandhani might suffer a few setbacks, but let us not forget that although it is a student organisation with limitations, through the years it has inspired many humanitarian organisations. To the masses, Sandhani's appeal is simple: donate blood, save life.



CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

In Search of a Way Out

"There's No Insuperable Problem, if There's the Will to Solve"

An Interview with Salma Sobhan, Executive Director of Ain O Salish Kendra, by Lamis Hossain

GIVEN a choice, Salma Sobhan, Bar-at-law and Executive Director of Ain O Salish Kendra, a human rights and legal aid centre, would prefer fresh general elections to by-elections.

In an interview with the Daily Star, Sobhan acknowledged that 90 days is a very short time to put together a mechanism to ensure free and fair elections, but did not think that it was impossible. Organisations such as A.S.K, for example, can help with election monitoring and voter education.

Sobhan, the first woman barrister of Bangladesh, said that there is clearly a consensus among the citizens of Bangladesh for the current political impasse to be resolved. Her suggestion is for those concerned to respond to this consensus.

"We have been discussing this amongst ourselves at A.S.K and one of my colleagues made a suggestion I would like to share with you," Sobhan said. She proposed that a caretaker government could be formed from amongst the M.Ps of the Opposition and the Ruling Party.

Sobhan pointed out that according to article 56(4) of the Constitution, even following the dissolution of parliament, only those who were members immediately before its resolution can be members of the government to conduct elections. "According to the Speaker following the the Supreme Court's opinion, the Opposition remained members of Parliament until 19th June. If Parliament is dissolved, say for instance in August, the Opposition members would be deemed to have been members immediately before dissolution," she explained.

She thought that a truly neutral caretaker government would be better, but "as it would appear that this is not possible in the present circumstances we need to make the best of what is available to us."

Sobhan does not think that it is necessary to amend the Constitution: "There are many suggestions which would bypass this necessity. For instance Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed's suggestion (early this week)."

"There are no insuperable problems if there is the will to solve the crisis rather than each side trying to milk it to its advantage," she elaborated.

According to Sobhan, the current constitutional crisis was not created by the Opposition's demand for holding elections under a caretaker government, but resulted from the government's intransigence to the Opposition demand.

Sobhan does not know the reason for the government's initial reaction but guesses that, "it was a knee jerk reaction which has characterised its response to any suggestions made by those who are seen as not being with it."

However, Sobhan added that it was a pity that the Opposition did not hold back their resignation even when the Government appeared to have finally conceded on all points but one.

Giving her opinion on post facto ratifications of amendments to the Constitution, Sobhan said that the question was whether we want to continue such a cycle of ratifications.

"It should be understood that the right of an individual to challenge a particular law is an inherent one. What would happen in a particular case will depend upon the merits of the case," Sobhan said.

According to Sobhan, one of the founder members of Ain o Salish, a caretaker government by itself will not ensure free and fair elections. She conceded that it was an important factor, but that there were other aspects to consider such as controlling the use and misuse of money, prevention of intimidation not just on the day of the elections but before the elections, accurate electoral rolls, independent and neutral observers, safety of the ballot boxes and so forth.

The most important point, Sobhan pointed out was freeing the media from control. "The reneging of the ruling party on this point has been quite shocking," Sobhan observed. "It is not, possible to counteract three and a half years of biased reports in 90 days. But it is worth making a start, if only to demonstrate what it is like to have a free media."

COMPUTER EDUCATION

Its Social Implications in Bangladesh

by Dr R I Sharif

THERE is a proverb that "education is the backbone of a nation," and another, "little learning is a dangerous thing." The meaning of these sentences are known to all but the thoughts present in it are not realised at all times. Computer technology in the modern world is advancing so rapidly that even most developed countries find it difficult to keep in touch with the latest development and its proper implementation. We are far from the scenario of the development world. Still it is not too late to make some educational policy and proper planning to provide up to date knowledge to the young people in the field of computing.

In most countries, governments are giving top priority to the education sector for providing proper education with a view to implement their knowledge in the socio-economic development of the country. Fortunately, Bangladesh government has given a top priority to education, but the practical picture does not indicate any such changes due to lack of proper planning and policy making by the real experts and educationists.

At present, Dhaka University, BUET, Rajshahi University, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, Jahangirnagar University and Microland IICE under the University of London, along with some private Universities (North South, Independent, IUBAT, etc), are providing limited scope to study BSc degree (Honours) in Computing Science.

Is it wise to think that by producing only 200/300 graduates per year, Bangladesh will meet the requirements of national and international demands? Moreover, how many of these will be able to make a positive contribution in this field? Answers to these questions are manifold. If we start teaching this subject suddenly in all the Universities and Colleges, with a view to producing 4000/5000 graduates per year from the year 2000, without any logical plan and programme of teachers' training, writing text books, procurement of computer equipment and laboratory facilities, then we will end up only with data entry operators.

Yes, we can produce large numbers of manpower but what will be their quality? In my opinion, quality of manpower rather than their quantity in the field of computing is an important factor to consider. A very good system analyst in a team of 10 expert programmers can change the socio-economic condition of Bangladesh by introducing computer systems in place of existing manual systems in most of the organisations with the support and cooperation of government (decision of policy makers, planners and implementers), political parties and computer experts. If the educated people of our society, and government, want to produce a huge amount of unskilled manpower only (data entry operators) to meet national and international demands, then the new computer education policy (to be implemented soon) may be accepted.

But how long should we be treated as computer-user slaves in the hands of very few masters at home and abroad? We should think about our next generation, and therefore our education systems should be designed in such a way that at least some of them will make a difference to the socio-economic development of our country. The design of the present SSC and HSC syllabus and education policies are highly disappointing to the nation. From an educational-system analyst's point of view, it is possible to predict that any socio-economic and technological development of the country using the products of IT (Information Technology) in, the 'near future will be dark if the education systems and policies of producing trained teachers of IT are not going to be changed.

Many countries are developed and are being developed through a systematic and steady way of introducing modern IT, and the major way to do that comes from the interest and outlook of the leaders of the country, along with ideas of the experts.

We know computer machines alone cannot solve all of our problems until and unless proper instructions are provided. In order to utilise tremendous activities and resources of the hardware using software of processing our daily data fastly, efficiently, reliably and accurately, we need various categories of manpower such as data processing managers, systems analysts, programmers, system engineers and operators.

As we know, proper training should be provided from childhood in any type of education. In this age children have much curiosity to learn, and they can learn most things very fast. Once young talents are identified, they can be provided further facilities and an environment for their higher education.

Most countries' education policies are designed with the ideas and suggestions of real experts in such a way that they offer computer courses from school level with a view to identify the talented and enthusiastic students in this field. Later on they provide all necessary facilities for their higher education to produce real skilled manpower.

At SSC and HSC level, a high level programming language and one/two applications package programmes along with basic data processing techniques, operating systems, algorithms design, systems analysis and design, computer systems and proper maintenance and servicing idea should be included.

It is very important to know that real computer science can not be learned without having sufficient knowledge in mathematics. It is very sad for the nation as a whole that the Computer Science syllabus at SSC and HSC level was designed and implemented 2/3 years ago, but the response of interest to study this subject is very negligible. This reason might be lack of computer equipment and shortage of trained teachers along with a defective syllabus and non availability of good text books.

Recently, the Secondary and Higher Secondary Text Book Board has been trying to improve the syllabus again by forming a national expert committee. Unfortunately, some of the members of that committee are not at all related with computer activities, although some of them are from Bangladesh Computer Samity.

It may be mentioned that Computer Science Graduates and Postgraduate are being produced indirectly under the name of the department of Applied Physics and Electronics at Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities, since 1978 and most of them are holding leading positions in many organisations and institutions in home and abroad. BUET and other Universities have also started this subject recently. Microland International Institute of Computer and Electronics, under the approval of the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council, has been preparing students for appearing in international GCE O-level and A-level Computing Science (similar to SSC and HSC level) since 1989. So, the Text Book Board and Ministry of Education could get lot of help and cooperation from the real experts and computer educationists to make better educational policy and for designing an international standard syllabus if they really want to.

It is known that even in the redesigned syllabus of SSC and HSC level, a high level language and related topics, such as fundamental idea of algorithms design, data structures and system design, are not going to be included. Moreover, this syllabus simply contains some application packages and package programming. It is also known that Computer Science would be an alternative subject to a mathematical subject. So a student cannot take these two subjects at SSC and HSC at the same time. Most of our intellectuals know from the education system of developed countries, and some developing countries, that Computer Science cannot be studied without sufficient knowledge in a mathematical subject, and students without a mathematical subject cannot get admission in Computer Science undergraduate courses at University. Many contributions in the field of computing came from famous mathematicians.

Most students with a strong background in mathematics will not show interest in taking Computer Science in SSC and HSC in lieu of mathematics. Then, without mathematics and without a knowledge of high level programming language, the nation will produce computer manpower to work as data entry operators and users of application packages. How can it be possible to produce system analysts and programmes? Should we hire these experts from abroad? If we hire experts from abroad, then obviously our manpower will only work as operators under their control.

I believe that we have many young talented computer loving people between the ages of 14-18 years in Bangladesh, and if we could provide standard education from their childhood, the nation could produce at least a few international standard computer software experts. It is seen that some brilliant students get admission to University for higher education but some of them may not be interested to learn Computer Science, and those who are interested may not be able to enter into limited higher education facilities in the University level at present. So, the system should be changed to provide facilities to the real computer whizz kids for their further higher education.

If we do proper analysis of our present education system then we will find that in most of the colleges, practical classes in Physics, Chemistry and Biology are almost nil. So, they find it extremely difficult to follow the classes at University level, and those who do not get chance to enter into University for higher study cannot apply their knowledge in a practical field as they have not learned anything properly without a practical knowledge of the subject. Our education policy and system for Computer Science should be application oriented so that jobs will be available after completion of study at any level.

Many points are discussed here, and some readers may annoyed. But for any national academic activity, or other activities and problems, government and appropriate authorities should try to find real experts and dynamic persons in the particular subject area to seek help and suggestions for proper formulation and solution of a system. We generally identify experts who talk too much but know little, or we identify experts who support ideas of the policy makers and planners blindly. Last but not least, any national academic and educational polices should be thoroughly investigated, analysed, designed and then implemented with the cooperation of the real experts and specialists of the country for our national benefit and to provide a better future for our next generation.

The writer works at the Department of Applied Physics and Electronics, Dhaka University, and is Vice President of the Bangladesh Computer Society.

Pesticide: The Silent Killer

by Somdutt

AN apple a day no longer keeps and doctor away. Instead, increasing use of pesticides on fruits and vegetables poses a health hazard.

According to WHO estimates, some 20,000 people die, and as many as one million are affected due to pesticide poisoning every year, in India.

Of the total amount of pesticides used, as much as 13 to 14 per cent is consumed from fruits and vegetables, which takes up only 3 per cent of the total cropped area in the country.

When their residual toxicity level exceeds the prescribed limit, the fruits and vegetables, especially if consumed raw, are a source of slow poison. Not just that, pesticides get into the water, soil and air and eventually into the entire food chain.

Accumulation of toxic residues in our body tissues through the food chain, and biomagnification of residues in the system, harms the human body in various ways.

Pesticide residues, consisting of remnants of pesticide molecules, its metabolites, degradation products and bound and conjugated residues, are commonly found in fruits and vegetables or on crop plants. Consumption of these fruits and vegetables, contaminated even in traces, is capable of causing a threat to human life.

Fresh fruits and vegetables consumed directly from field harvest are more poisonous if pesticides are sprayed close to their harvest time.

Mere presence of a few pesticide residues in parts per million or billion (ppm, ppb) level is not significant unless the problem is serious and persistent.