

New Admission Rule: Opening a Can of Worms

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

THE Education Ministry's new rule banning admission tests for entering Higher Secondary Certificate Colleges has been received with mixed feelings. While there are those who support the government's decision and agree that this is a simpler more fair way of selecting students, others disagree arguing that the new system will do more harm than good.

The fact that now students will be admitted according to their SSC results, the government says, will remove many of the inconveniences and extra financial burden associated with the previous system of admission tests. For one thing, the colleges can no longer charge fees for admission test forms, an amount going up to 200 taka or more per form; instead, students are only required to pay 10 taka for an application form. Secondly, and more importantly, there will no longer be any need to go to coaching centers which have mushroomed to alarming proportions in order to 'prepare' students for the admission tests. This has been the biggest reason for the government's decision. Those who teach at these centres allegedly have been charging exorbitant tuition fees, thus putting an unnecessary financial burden on the parents of these students.

Allegations of widespread cheating during admission tests especially in small mufassil towns where political groups and mastans allegedly coerce teachers to give high marks to their candidates, has also made the new rule seem justified.

"The fact that these money-making coaching centres will close and parents financial burden will decrease makes this a welcome system," says Moshir Rahman.



Students protesting the new admission rule.

man, Principal of Adamjee College in Cantonment. He however admits that the new rule will work only in a corruption free system. "If for example, says Rahman, 'one student gets 710 and another 750 and the second student has manipulated his marks by cheating, then it will be the student without merit who will get into college'. But if there is no such malpractice then this will have long term benefits implies Rahman. 'Those kids who would have used their 'mastaan' tactics to score high marks at the admission tests will now realize that if they don't study hard and get decent marks in their SSC they won't be admitted. This rule, therefore, should be imposed at all levels including university'.

Many, however, disagree with such reasoning, saying that the absence of an admission test will actually increase cheating during the SSC exams since candidates know that a high score in the exams will easily get them

admitted. Some students it seems, prefer to have the admission test since it gives them those who did not score as well as they hoped to in the SSC examination, a second chance.

But even students with good scores may suffer due to the new rule. Masheed Ahmed, a first year HSC student at Vikarunnessa College who was one of the lucky ones to get admitted very easily with a score of 878, says that many of her friends, although had high scores, could not get into the college because of the new rule. 'Many of my classmates got 850 which is a very good score, but because the qualifying mark for admission was 861 or above, says Masheed, 'they couldn't get into the college of their choice'.

Computer errors in calculating the marks of the SSC English first paper this year has led to further complications, which could happen again. 'A friend of mine', Masheed continues, 'got 856 in her English first paper and

so could not get into Vikarunnessa, later she found out that there was a mistake in the calculations and she had actually scored more than the 861 minimum; but by then it was too late.'

Moreover, the admission test, according to Ambreen, a student of DU, is based on the entire syllabus and so tests students on what they really know and have retained while the SSC exams are predominantly based on how much can be memorized.

The inevitable question of this controversial issue is that should the no admission test rule be extended to the universities? Most university students, those that are truly sincere about learning, prefer to have the admission tests since it helps to select the better students, thus maintaining a certain academic standard. This is especially true in the case of BUET (Engineering Institute) where the admission tests is essential to select the hand-

ful of students from about three thousand or more applicants.

"Given the quality of our public exam system," says Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud, Chairman of the Economics Department at DU, "admission tests in some form or another are needed as a screening device".

"It is necessary for example," he continues, "to test whether the candidates have attained a minimum standard of writing skills. However, the number of students eligible for appearing in the admission test needs to be restrained in order to keep the admission test manageable and to ensure a uniform and fair standard of evaluation".

In Dhaka University, Mahmud, adds, this number has been more than ten times the number of seats available. The large majority of these students failed to obtain even qualifying marks he says. "Perhaps no more than 4 to 5 students should be allowed to compete for the available number of seats", Mahmud adds.

Whether the new 'no-test' rule will benefit students and institutions, will depend on whether the public examinations and the method of correction are fraud-free. Unless this is ensured, the absence of admission tests will open the flood gates for unscrupulous students and teachers to use it for their own purposes. Consequently it will be the really meritorious students who will suffer since those who have the means to cheat and get away with it, will be taking their seats in college. The Ministry of Education's first priority, therefore should be to clean up the public examination system. Otherwise by imposing this 'no admission test' mandate the government may be just opening a can of worms.

Communal Hatred

The Malaise of a Small Minority or a Reflection of the Mainstream?

by Farah Ghuznavi

WE Bangalis like to think of ourselves as being a peace-loving people. We pride ourselves on our rich cultural heritage, which is a legacy of the coexistence and intermingling of the communities which have lived on this soil before us. For hundreds of years, Hindus and Muslims have lived together in this land, and today, as a 'civilised' nation, we like to believe that we, at least, are free from the ugly stain of communalism which besets much of the sub-continent today.

Yet is that really the case? It is certainly true that the history of Bengal has been less bloody in terms of communal violence in this century than many other places have been. But the rise of fundamentalism in recent years has been frightening to watch. These days we frequently hear of religious leaders issuing fatwas on anyone who disagrees with them, or village shalishes (operating in the manner of kangaroo courts) handing out punishments which belong to the middle ages, to women who are often themselves the victims of violence. The last decade has even seen some of these views legitimised by the rise of certain politicians to power. And if you ask any member of a minority community today whether they really feel safe in Bangladesh, it seems unlikely that they will get an affirmative answer, if the answer is an honest one.

Take the case of a colleague of mine, Disha. She is a Hindu, and not a particularly religious one. Her family home, in north Bengal, where her parents still live, is a relatively peaceful place. In 1971, when the family were in hiding and desperate for money, they were forced to sell off the main part of their huge ancestral home for a fraction of its value. As a result, they now have a Muslim family living in their backyard. Having to sell off the house was traumatic enough, but because this family are fundamentalist Muslims, Disha and her family are now forced to live in a virtual state of siege in their own home.

The neighbouring family's enmity towards them takes a variety of forms, from minor annoyances to serious harassment. The children of that house are particularly virulent in their hatred of Hindus. They make a point of shouting at Disha and her family members from a safe distance, and calling them names like 'maiaun'. On one occasion, a boy actually sat in their front yard ostentatiously sharpening a small knife and threatening her family members by saying, "When there is a riot, I will cut you to bits".

Their other antics have included stoning Disha's 'bel' (wood-apple) tree and tearing up her spinach patch. When they stoned the tree, they even tied a rope to the identified for repair work to avoid mud slides. Meanwhile, new laws on tree-felling have been introduced and more than 350,000 trees have been planted in Kuala Lumpur alone.

A proposed highway linking the hill resorts of Fraser's Hill, Cameron Highlands and Genting is currently on hold while the highland ecosystems are reassessed. The conservation director of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) for Nature Malaysia, Dr Isabelle Neermala Louis, comments: "We agree that efforts must be made to understand the country's topographical situation, but there is ample land for further development outside the highland areas and protected forests".

Says Public Works Minister Samy Vellu: "The 240-km road will go ahead, but in such a way as not to disturb the topographical and ecological settings of the area". There could be no greater metamorphosis than that which occurred on the sight of the 400-metre Kuala Lumpur Tower, the nation's principal telecommunications tower built on Bukit Nanas, the only bit of virgin jungle that remained in the heart of the city. There, the stone age quickly became the space age.

Also giving cause for concern is the fast-rising Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) project, including the world's tallest office complex, the twin Petronas Towers. A survey carried out by the University of Malaya research team in 1991 showed that Kuala Lumpur was fighting a losing battle to preserve what was left of its natural greenery. But that was before the Garden State proposal, before the LRT, the electric train, the myriad of new laws and before the Putrajaya plan.

For all its traffic jams and disappearing forests, Malaysia is still an enormously attractive country to both tourists and investors. To those who think there can be only one winner in a fight between a bulldozer and a monkey, the Malaysian government is challenging: think again.

Thanks to the efforts of the environmental pressure groups and the belated greening of the government, the bulldozer driver now has strict guidelines — and a monkey on his back. GEMINI NEWS

stone, so that they could retrieve it easily (labour-saving techniques for vandalism, no less!) But they surpassed themselves with the spinach patch; there they uprooted the spinach, and then danced all over the area where it had been growing, in order to ensure that none of it survived. Their actions would seem to demonstrate that they are extremely creative children, so it makes me wonder what they could achieve if those IQs were used in school, rather than in creating problems for their hapless neighbours!

Of course, they were only reflecting the attitudes of the adults in their house. After the house had been sold, the pond which was situated on the property effectively became joint property, with about a quarter of it falling on the neighbours' land, and the remaining three-quarters belonging to Disha's parents. Without any warning or explanations, the neighbours dug up the brick foundation and used the bricks to build a market in front of their house. Needless to say, this left the pond in a state of serious disrepair.

Subsequently, Disha's parents leased the remaining one-fourth of the pond from the neighbours, in order to engage in pisciculture. They released several improved breeds of fish into the pond, investing a considerable sum in the venture. The neighbours not only repeatedly poached fish from the pond, one night they went out there with fish nets and raided all the fish. They later turned a stone-deaf ear to the complaints made by the Hindu family regarding this matter.

Nor were the neighbours only hostile to Disha's family. The front section of Disha's house (attached on one side to the house occupied by these neighbours, but belonging to Disha's family) is rented by some sweetmakers. At one stage, they were coming into the shop each morning only to find that many of the sweets were missing, and others had been destroyed and were lying around on the floor. Since their shop was already well protected, the owners were dumbfounded about what to do next. They started leaving a young boy inside the shop every night, but the thefts continued.

One night, when the boy was nodding off to sleep, he suddenly saw a long, thin stick come into the room and embed itself into one of the sweets. As he watched in astonishment, the stick was then withdrawn, with the sweet impaled on it, through the ventilator carved in the upper corner of one of the walls. As the boy watched, the stick was sent in again, and another sweet was removed. This galvanised him into action, and he rushed

out through the back to fetch one of the owners. Since the ventilator that the stick had come through led onto the roof of the house behind, they then went up there to see what was going on. Four boys of that family were caught red-handed, holding the stick and sitting there with a pile of sweets next to them! Meanwhile, some of the sweets had fallen off the stick and lay smashed on the floor of the shop.

The matter was immediately raised with the boys' family, who basically shrugged their shoulders and claimed that boys would be boys. For anyone who thinks that this was just an amusing prank, they might be interested to know what the boys had to say in their own defence. Since the shop belonged to Hindus, they reasoned, they were entitled to do whatever they wanted, since the Hindus had no right to be in this country (that the shop was being rented from Disha's parents by the sweetmakers gave them no rights, of course). Even if it is accepted that children can misunderstand "grown-up" things like rent agreements, there is no such excuse that can be used in the case of adults i.e. their parents. It seems that children have no problems picking up "grown-up" things like hatred from their elders.

Things took an even more serious turn with the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. A few weeks after this incident, when Disha had gone home to visit her parents, the same boys (all around the age of ten or twelve) threw a few stones at her while she was folding clothes on the veranda of her house. One of those hit her on the temple. She started bleeding, and almost passed out as a result. When her father, outraged at the boys' attack on her, reported the attack to his neighbours, the response was much the same as it had been over the sweetshop incident.

For people like Disha, communalism is not a distant memory or a vague threat. If her neighbours behave like this on a daily basis, then heaven help her family if anyone in the area ever decides to go on a riot. What is most frightening about these changing times, is that so many of us don't even recognise how much things have already changed. Ten years ago, it would have been unimaginable to find ourselves in the situation that we are in today. Yet the rise of religious zealotry is still passed off as the actions of a small minority. That may be so, but unless the silent majority of decent, non-communal people in this country wake up to the threat of what these changes represent, there may well come a time, perhaps even within the next decade, when we can no longer blame these incidents on an isolated minority.

A Garden State or Concrete Jungle?

by Bob Holmes

MALAYSIA'S plans to build a model garden city to house its new government capital has been heralded as an indication of the country's commitment to 'green' development.

But with huge building plans also in the works, observers are asking: will Malaysia become Southeast Asia's garden state or its next concrete jungle?

"We want to protect and beautify the environment and make living more conducive," Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamed told Malaysia's cabinet before he recently unveiled plans for a £5 billion new Federal Government administrative centre south of Kuala Lumpur.

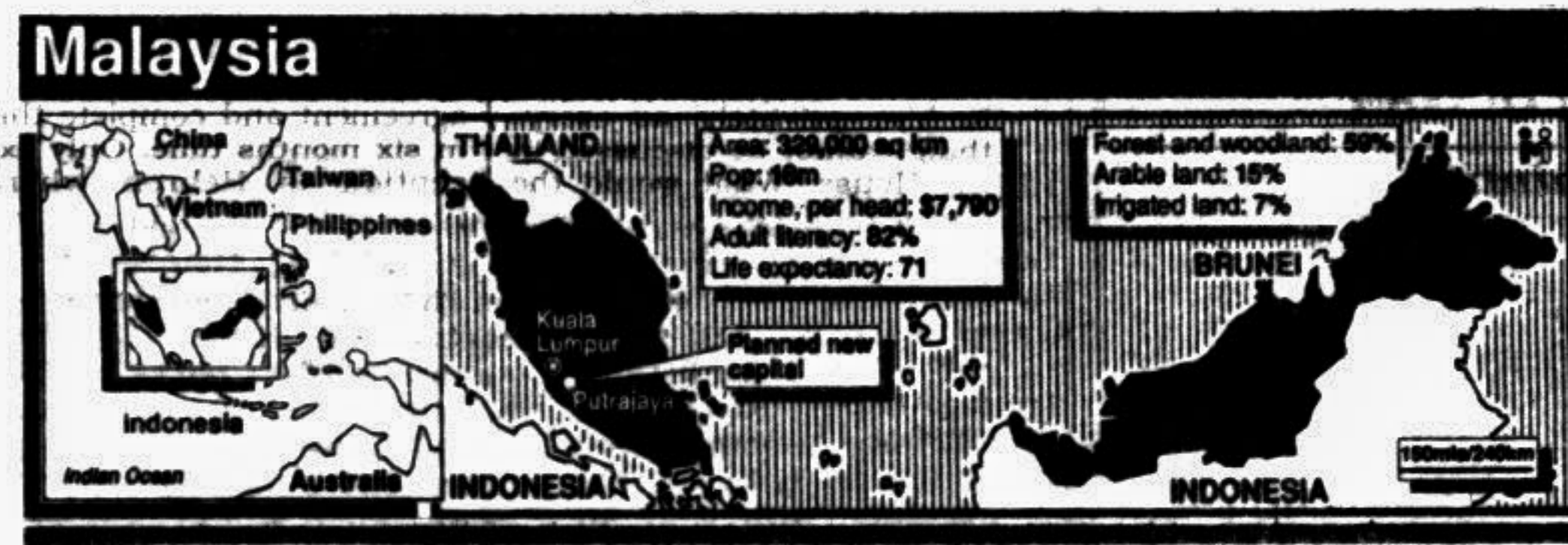
"Putrajaya will be harmonious with the environment and a model of town development at an international level," he says of the new city, named after Abdul Rahman Putra, Malaysia's first prime minister. In the wake of Mahatir's announcement, anti-logging protesters could be heard choking in surprise. Malaysia's massive growth — pegged at more than 8 per cent a year for the past eight years — has not come without environmental casualties.

Experts have warned that the current capital, Kuala Lumpur, is only five years from gridlock — and new construction is continually underway.

Housing projects and golf courses continue to encroach as fast as the forests in Sabah and Sarawak are denuded and it is not uncommon to see monkeys and bulldozers on the same patch of land. To Malaysia's harshest critics, the proposed greening of the country is a mere smoke screen for development. More moderate observers say the objectives may be admirable — but they are easier said than done.

Already adept at first clearing precious forests and then lining highways with palms and bougainvillea, and building exquisitely landscaped condominiums and country clubs, Malaysia still has some convincing to do. The aims are fine and dandy but it could be like logging, where strict rules are in place but operational problems occur. Landscaping sounds all right, but it can be very damaging, too," says Gurmit Singh, adviser to the Environmental Protection Society (Malaysia).

Landscaping that is not sensitive to natural features can threaten existing species, he says. Some observers say that the fact Malaysia is even talking about green goals — when hell-bent on growth — deserves better press than it gets.



Any nation that has been independent for just 37 years is entitled to be master of its own destiny and can be forgiven for turning a deaf ear to environmental concerns — especially from long-decorated Western nations on high horses, they say.

However, Malaysia does not wish to be a pariah in an increasingly green world order. And just as with Mahatir's Vision 2020 — the plan to make the country fully developed in 25 years — Malaysia has a much better chance of reaching its new garden state status than many sceptics are prepared to admit.

Mahatir says that 78 per cent of Malaysia's land area is still covered by forest. His oft-stated position is that 50 per cent must remain which

still leaves a healthy 28 per cent to develop.

According to the 1995 United Nation's Human Development Report, Malaysia's 329,000 square kilometres are actually covered by 59 per cent forest and woodland.

Malaysia remains confident of achieving what to many seems a mission impossible: maintaining an acceptable balance between development and conservation.

Malaysia's Housing and Local Government Minister Dr Ting Chew Peh said of the garden state plan: "We want to grow trees along all major highways and river banks. The project will be implemented in a systematic manner with local authorities responsible for the landscaping, planting and maintenance work."

A new department will be set up to oversee the nationwide project, with both Public Works and Agriculture Ministries involved in choosing the species of trees and deciding where to plant them. Work has just started on a new suburban electric train service, and work gathers pace on Kuala Lumpur's long-awaited Light Rail Transit (LRT) system, the first phase of which opens next year.

The mass transportation projects may seem too little, too late, but it's enough to make Bangkok and Jakarta residents more than green with envy. Many buildings still await their safety certificates, while about 126 sites along the

Hartal's Toll on the Nation

by Farhana Yusuf

OPPOSITION calls 72 hours hartals in the city, a 24 hours hartal observed throughout the country, so and so parties calls for a 48 hours hartal, are the various headlines covering a major area in the front pages of all newspapers. Little do these people know when they are giving such declarations how much trauma and inconvenience they are creating for the people of this country. It is not only the continuity of life that is interrupted, but with the interruption comes disturbance, annoyance and innumerable losses. Do the hartal-callers ever think how a rickshaw-puller is supposed to survive when there is a 72-hours hartal in the city? It almost throws hell upon the roof: How do those unfortunate people carry on whose daily food comes from their day's earnings? Those who call hartals should do well to consider all this if they want to gain people's confidence and popularity. Keeping poor people in semi-starvation will only serve to irritate them and will certainly not make them support their tormentors.

Hartals put people into all kinds of inconveniences. Consider those serious patients in hospitals pleading

constant care and attention, how hard and tiring it is for hospital attendants to switch back and forth from home to hospital with meals for patients. Those who are to go abroad and have to be at the airport on time and those who arrive from outside find themselves greatly inconvenienced. Sometimes domestic flights have to be cancelled or other flights rescheduled at the expense of immeasurable trouble and difficulty. Many plans are broken, many important engagements shelved away. A sense of disgust replaces the initial frustration and anger in people's mind. Hartal callers are so engrossed in trying to establish their own rights and trying to affirm their own demands by calling frequent hartals they don't seem to realize that they are in fact violating the rights of those they are promising to work so faithfully for.

The aim of politics is welfare of the people, to be concerned with their problems. What are the hartal callers aiming at then and what do they hope to achieve? Shouldn't they be trying to gain popularity and trust by working for the people and seeing to their welfare in-

stead of being a source of inconvenience and headache to them? About 85% of the people in the country don't support Hartals. And why should they? It is unimaginable what amount of loss a three-consecutive days hartal brings to the nation, how much the students especially, suffer, the difficulties they have to face later — class schedules change, exams are shifted, important lectures cancelled. The idea of a 72-hours strike in a country would seem to people of other countries, a case of utter madness.

There are many other ways of communicating with one's problems other ways of voicing objections, but calling hartals do not solve the problems any more than breaking cars unnecessarily does. It is right that people should protest against a wrong, but not through breaking cars and ruining other peoples' property as is their tendency. Why should the protestors take their anger out on something that has no relevance to their course?

If hartal is a part and parcel of politics, then it is certainly not realistic politics in my opinion. It is my plea to those who are calling hartals to put a stop to this and let the people lead normal lives.

What's All the Adda About?

by Gemini Wahhaj

EVERY Monday a group of women meet at Narigrantha Prabartana for a good, hearty adda. Who are these women, and what do they talk about?

This writer overheard the conversation at one particular meeting led by a noted cultural artist. The artist proposed that the happiness of a woman depends on a surprise gift from her husband. "Suppose your husband gives you a pair of gold earrings, won't that please you?" she asked. The women present nodded earnestly, and a murmur of agreement went around the room. Hmm, isn't Adda supposed to be a more liberated congregation?

Farida Akhtar compiled an excellent book of reflections on Prabartana Adda called 'Adda'. The whole purpose of Adda, says Akhtar, is to let city women gather and just talk about whatever they please. Yes, there's a lot of feminine conversation (talk of sarees and gold, for example), but social and political issues are not left alone either.

One Adda meeting raised the question, "Is being a housewife a profession?" During introductions, several women had described themselves as teachers or researchers, but one woman said, "I don't do anything, I'm a housewife." This started a discussion about what a housewife does, and if it is correct to assume that she has no identity other than being somebody's wife. A thorough investigation of a housewife's myriad responsi-

bilities led to the proposal — call her house manager, not housewife.

"Should women change their name after marriage?" was the topic of another adda. And do BTW actresses have a responsibility to portray women in a positive manner? Yes, said the women of Prabartana, as they praised Ferdousi Majumdar for turning down a role that was disrespectful to women. Khaleda Zia was criticised for wearing foreign sarees (French chiffon), a children's writer was invited to tell stories, and some foreign visitors dropped in to talk about women deserted by their men. In such a case, the women of Prabartana decided, a woman must overcome her emotional ties in order to understand that what the man did is wrong.

But perhaps the best way to describe the Adda spirit is how Suraiya Begum puts it: "Pani ana bara shukh, dekha jai dosher mukh [A Bangla proverb], in villages, women go out with pitchers to get water from the riverside. Here they meet to talk for a while with other women cooped up in other houses. This adda is the high point of their day. The women of Narigrantha Prabartana feel the same way.



Not just faces. There's time to be spent as well. — Courtesy: Farhana Adzim