

Children: Victims of A Culture of Silence

BANGLADESH a deltaic plain at the foothills of the Himalayas is intermittently visited by natural calamities, coupled with persistent poverty makes the survival, protection and development of children a big challenge. The right of each child is the right to live in this mother world.

In the country of 111 million, children have to bear the brunt of neglect in terms of normal growth, health and education. The reason for such an appalling situation lies somewhere else. Children, the nation's 50 per cent population is the most vulnerable target of neglect as in other Southern nations. Having the highest children mortality (110 per 1,000 live births) and high maternal deaths in a poorest country in the world, makes the nation's sustainable development effort negative. Most of the four million underweight children born each year, die exposed to a chain of illnesses. Intervention through government primary health infrastructure and NGOs can save 65 per cent of child deaths by relatively simple, inexpensive effective methods.

The close link between poverty, illness, malnutrition and high mortality for both mothers and children gives one cause to believe that Bangladesh's high death rate will continue since the cycle of deprivation continues. However, given the impossibility of radical poverty alleviation in the future, interventions that create an impact on lives of women and children in the immediate short

term must be promoted. The impact of gender discrimination falls with the girl-child population. This discrimination is observed in the nutritional status of girls in respect to boys. Causing increased infant deaths among girls. Even reporting of illness, discrepancy is found among girl-child by parents. Mothers too, do not report of illness, especially related to pregnancy.

Most of the women in rural and urban Bangladesh are disadvantaged; underfed, overworked and living under severe economic constraints. Thus the vulnerability of the child starts from within the womb, primarily because of the mother's malnutrition. The vulnerability accelerates when pregnant women are delivered by untrained Dai's (traditional birth attendants). Though, maternal neglect is blamed for the child's illness.

Three priority areas for advocacy and intervention are safe motherhood, nutrition and health. This has been jointly spelled out by the Bangladesh government and UNICEF in a national plan for 1990 decade to reduce child and maternal deaths by half.

Despite the gloomy picture, Bangladesh has set unique examples of success globally. For example, the achievement of child immunization and it's sustainability presently is the highest among the South nations. Almost all the mothers have the knowledge to prepare oral saline for protecting children from diarrhoea.

More and more poor mothers in pain and hunger have pushed away their veil

by Saleem Samad

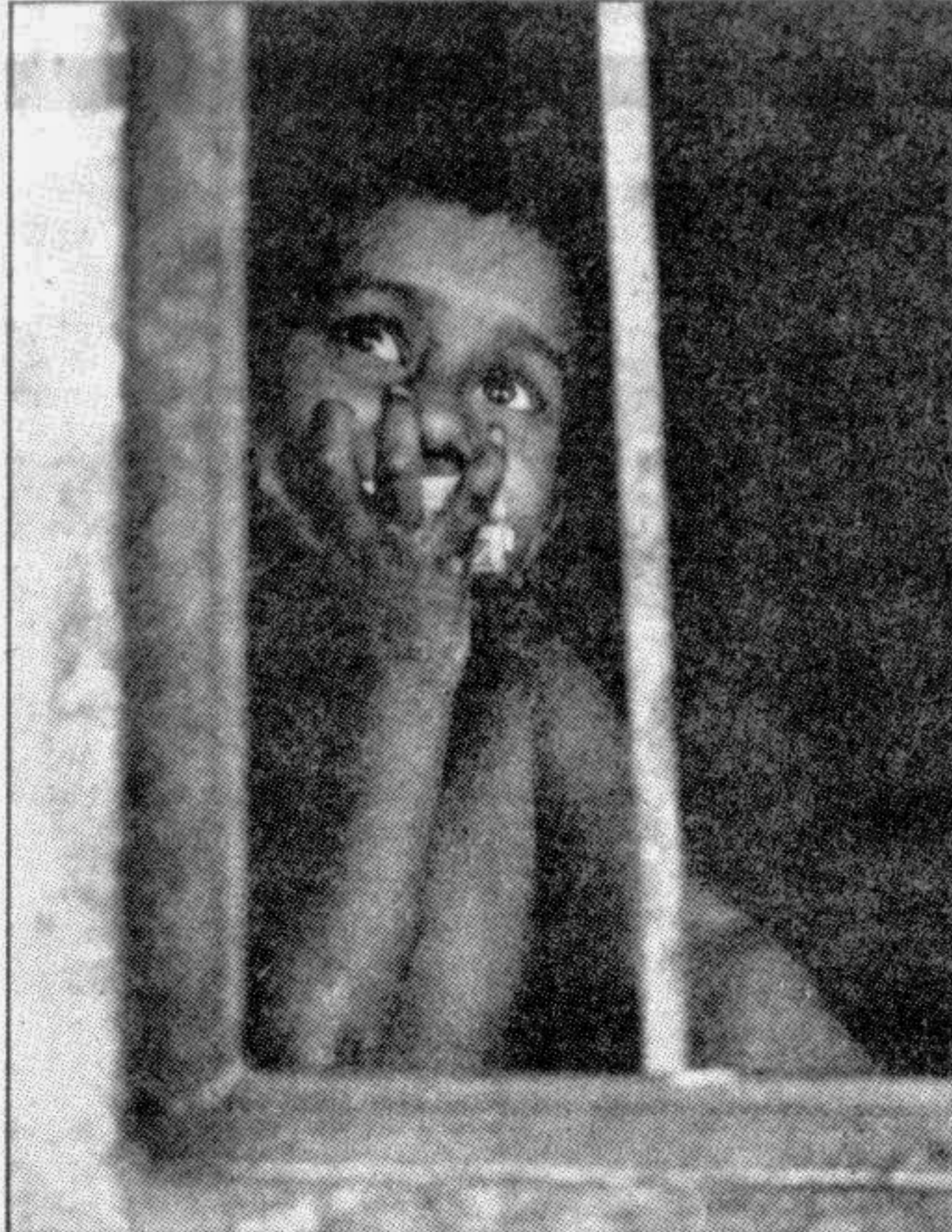


Photo by Shezaad Noorani, courtesy - UNICEF

Children are most disadvantaged as their age makes them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. The vulnerability causes abuse, abandonment and neglect.

Children have always traditionally worked on the land. Today, children are more vulnerable in urban areas than in the rural, the informal work sector where neither the family nor the law accord protection.

'Nimble fingers' is a quality sought by employers justifying child labour. However, studies say that the skills these small workers acquire are of little use to them elsewhere in the labour market. As they get older, they are replaced by yet another set of young, cheap, children who can be manipulated. It gives new meaning to such terms as 'redundancy' or early retirement.

Working children less than 15 years old are considered child laborers according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The Employment Child Act, 1938 in Bangladesh restricts employment of children under 16. Yet the Bangladesh government published Labour Force Survey shows age 5-9 as labourers. A further 2.8 million children age 10-14 or nine per cent of the total civilian work force, were reported to be engaged in labour. Some 85 per cent of the child labourers were boys. Their average income was Taka 572 (\$15) per month.

A study in 1990 on the child labourers in the capital Dhaka found that 71 per cent of them had migrated to the

city mostly with their families from low land-people ratio areas susceptible to natural calamities and poverty. Most of the child labour is engaged in rag picking, cigarette industry, handloom, sari-making and embroidery, tea stalls, eating shops, garments factories, construction sites and as coolies at bus stops, train stations and vegetable bazaars.

The law minister of the new democratic government, said that the child labourers supported themselves and supplemented their family's income, therefore the government is contemplating new laws to protect children at jobs. He also reiterated that laws will soon be made for compulsory primary education for all school age children.

Several NGOs working with children and human right activists, lawyers and journalists, academicians and researchers floated a network soon after Bangladesh, one of the first few countries to sign and ratify the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' at United Nations in New York in 1990. Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, a network of NGOs working with children commits to 'Children First'. It advocates to improve the quality of the specially difficult circumstances.

To quote Lord Buddha, 'Children are the greatest asset of Humankind.'

Development Features The writer, a development journalist, is an Ashoka Fellow specialising in sustainable development.

The 'Coconut' Conundrum

by Farah Ghuznavi

LIKE many other Bangalis, I have at various times been infuriated by the western perception of Bangladesh and Bangalis. A good example of such attitudes was recently illustrated by Sharmee Mahmud in her article 'High Risk High Fraud'. Perhaps we should not altogether be amazed at the existence of such attitudes, when it is not only western governments who feed these stereotypes; the western press also contributes to such perceptions in a big way. Hence the view of many westerners, that Bangladesh constitutes a land where the only noteworthy events are a series of constant disasters — drought, flood, famine and violence are frequently based on media coverage that chooses to focus on those events to the exclusion of all else.

Nevertheless, perhaps the only thing I find even more infuriating that these stereotypes of Bangladesh which exist in the minds of many westerners are the equally negative attitudes towards Bangladesh exhibited by many people of Bangali or sub-continental origin. By this, I don't mean only those who have been born and brought up in the west, whose ignorance may be responsible for some of their views, but those who are born and have lived here for many years, and then moved to the US or wherever, who thereafter spend their time denying their links with Bangladesh. Needless to say, the latter lose no time in ensuring that their attitudes are mirrored by their children, who are born overseas, and can therefore, deny that they ever had anything to do with a country like Bangladesh.

Take, for example, the experience of an expatriate Bangladeshi friend of mine. Despite being born and brought up in the UK, she maintains strong ties with Bangladesh and always introduces herself to people as a Bangali. When her parents took the family to visit some Bangali acquaintances of theirs on Eid several years ago, my friend was amazed to see their two daughters say to their mother: 'Oh, mummy, can we have some sweet spaghetti now?' Her puzzlement may not be too hard to understand, given that the girls were actually referring to shemal as 'sweet spaghetti'. Meanwhile, their proud father said: 'Amar meyera to akdum English' ('My daughters are totally English'). If being English is defined as being completely ignorant about your own culture, then his daughters clearly did qualify!

I first realised how common this syndrome is when I went abroad to study. There were always a group of Asian students who were trying very hard to be English — their accents changed within a week of arriving there, they would only listen to English music, talk about local political issues and sneer at those 'unsophisticated' enough to still admit to their origins. Some people contemptuously referred to such individuals as 'coconuts' i.e. brown on the outside, but white on the inside.

Their attitudes always made me uncomfortable, because while there are a number of things that can, and in my opinion should, be appreciated about western culture, I don't think that necessarily means one has to jettison one's own origins in this wholesale fashion. Least of all when it is a culture as rich as ours.

Another such case was described to me, by a Bangali friend currently studying in New York. She told me about her parents' friends in the US, who had recently 'persuaded' their fairly westernised daughter into an arranged marriage with an somewhat chauvinistic Bangali boy who was taken to the US from Noakhali. This man, after two years in the US, still speaks virtually no English. Nor does he hold a job, so he just lives off his in-laws. Not surprisingly, the couple are now having serious problems adjusting to one another. This kind of piecemeal adoption of some of our customs by such parents (that is, the customs which suit them!), when their daughter can't even speak Bangla, is a classic example of this type of expatriate syndrome.

So when my friend recently met the couple and asked them which language they communicated in, the wife swiftly replied, 'English!' at the same time as the husband firmly replied, 'Bangla.' Given that response, it's hardly surprising that they are having communication problems!

But to me, the classic story remains that of one of my cousins, who told me about a relative of hers who recently married an expatriate sub-continental. The wedding took place in the UK, and was a traditional one, with all the attendant pomp and ceremony. The only problem was, the groom wouldn't cooperate. While he had declared a preference for an arranged marriage, any other Asian traditions were clearly anathema to him. He refused to allow anyone to put mehendi on him, and would only agree to do so after he had put on a pair of white gloves (so that the mehendi went on the gloves), he went completely wild, spewing filthy abuse when the bride's cousin attempted to steal his shoes (part of the fun at any traditional wedding), and capped it all by refusing to eat biryani and insisting that he beserved steak and chips at the wedding!

'Confused' does not really seem a strong enough term to describe these people. To me the final paradox that remains is this, if such people spend all their lives putting down countries like Bangladesh, how on earth do they have any self-respect, given that they themselves spring from these supposedly despicable beginnings (however hard they may be trying to forget minor details like that!)?

Focus on Fishing Forces Down Net Profits

Felix Mponda writes from Blantyre, Malawi

Fish stocks in Malawi's lakes and ponds are decreasing alarmingly. The main reason is an increase in the number of fishermen using intensive methods that scoop up young fish.

MALAWI is being warned that fish stocks in the country's lakes and rivers are dwindling to dangerously low levels, due to overfishing.

The picture is mainly that of doom and gloom," says government researcher Dennis Tweddle.

A national environmental action plan drawn up by the Ministry of Research and Environmental Affairs describes the social and economic costs of fish depletion as dramatic. The total value of the catch dropped 77 per cent between 1986 and 1990, from 36 million kwacha to 8.4 million kwacha.

Production by 15,000 fishermen plays an important nutritional and economic role in the country, which has a gross national product (GNP) per head of only \$200. Annual fish output is about 75,000 tonnes, of which 83 per cent comes from lakes Malawi, Malombe, Chilwa and Chitwa. The rest is from the Lower Shire River and ponds.

Lake Malawi — 560 kilometres long, 80 kms wide and 722m at its deepest — is home to more than 500 species of fish.

Intensive fishing has increased in Lake Malawi, as

well as in Lake Malombe, in the last 10 years. Prime target is the tasty tilapia, locally called chambo.

Tweddle says that the previously sought-after mtchila — with in the 1950s was the major commercial species in Malawi — is threatened with extinction, and that chambo stocks in Lake Malombe face the same calamity.

In 1991, says Tweddle, Lake Malombe yielded under 500 tonnes of chambo compared with an average annual yield in the early 1980s of about 5,000 tonnes: "The chambo stocks have collapsed due to severe overfishing."

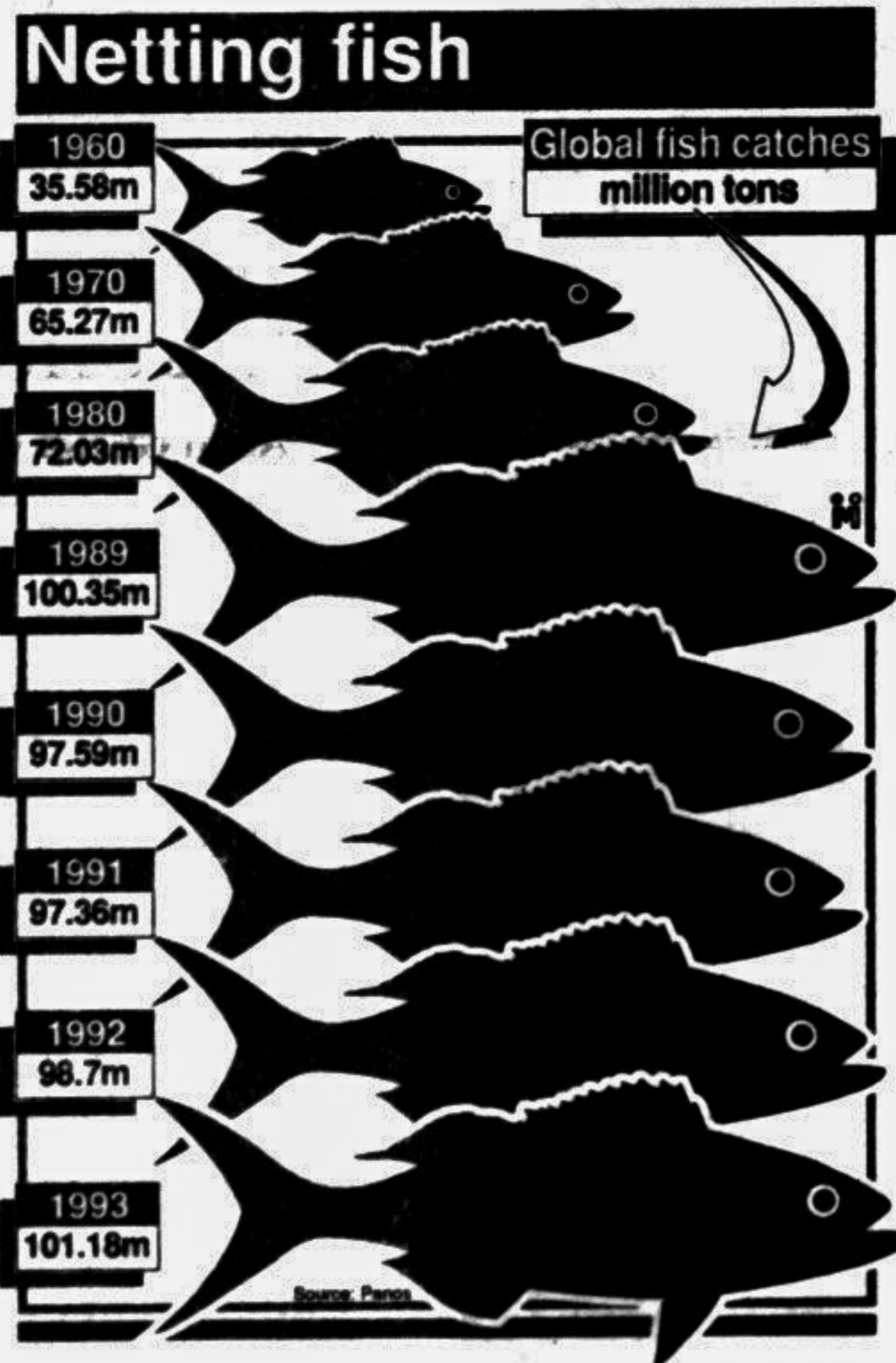
Main reason for the decline, he says, is the growing number of fishermen in the country, which has put pressure on the stocks. In addition, their methods of fishing have worsened the situation.

The problem now is caused by fishermen killing the baby fish," he says.

Legislation bans the catching of fish until they have had a chance to breed. It stipulates, for example, that any chambo less than 15 centimetres long must be returned alive to the water. But the laws are widely flouted and do not deter offenders. The Fisheries Act has low penalties for non-compliance and lacks coordination with many other laws covering forestry and land and water resources.

Seine (a large fishing net hung vertically underwater by means of floats and weights) and ringnet fishing is not allowed in November and December, in order to allow chambo to breed close to shore for two months.

Researchers say dragging large number of seines over the bottom of the lakes is



destroying the vegetation on which fish feed and where they hide from predators.

Said one researcher: 'The problem is very bad in Lake Malombe and in the upper Shire River. Lake Malombe used to be full of water weeds with lots of fish. Now the bottom is bare sand and mud.'

A branch of the Wildlife Society of Malawi has initiated an education campaign using schoolchildren to raise awareness about sustainable fishing.

'If the fishermen of today do not change the way they are fishing now, there will be no fish left for you to catch in the future. You need to educate your fathers and uncles about the right ways to fish and what happens when your elders fish with their present, very destructive methods,' said a society member.

The society said many fishermen know the problems they are creating, but are trapped into using unsuitable fishing methods because of the need to make money for survival.

— GEMINI NEWS
FELIX MPONDA is a Malawian freelance journalist.

Admission Test : Why Should it Continue?

Dr AKMA Quader

The present admission test system at the college, university or other levels has certainly many defects and limitations and there is no reason why these cannot be rectified or eliminated

RECENT press notes of the Ministry of Education related to admission into colleges and universities for further education purely on the basis of merit (marks obtained at SSC or HSC examinations as appropriate) have been acclaimed and welcome by the press at large and the guardians to some extent. But doubts and reservations have been expressed by a number of people including students, teachers and guardians. I bluntly warn those who have taken these press notes as relief instead of appreciating the far reaching consequences upon our education system and its obvious future.

The press notes underscore the following very cleverly by making 'coaching centres' scape-goat for the failure of the ministry in its main responsibility for ensuring quality education in the country:

a) There shall be no expansion of educational institutions by the government, that is, there shall not be any more 'Dhaka College', 'Eden college', or 'BUET' like places built by the state.

b) by abolishing the admission tests, the ministry has attempted to remove moral pressure on the government to create and expand facilities for education in the country, because news papers would no more pursue it as there will be no rush of the aspiring candidates appearing at the admission tests.

c) The rural based good students shall be truly de-

prived of their placements through admission tests for studying engineering, medicine, science etc and in better known colleges in the city. These students usually obtain less marks in the Board examinations because they do not know the art of writing answers in style and format required for scoring higher marks. But they have command over the subjects taught and they are self-learners.

d) Private coaching shall flourish and class room teaching shall deteriorate further specially in the cities.

e) Unfair means in the examinations in all possible forms shall be the order of the day.

The people including the Ministry of Education are definitely fed up with the abusive onslaught by the 'coaching centres' on our education system. Rather eliminating its existence and causes, therefore, we have opted for something which is devilish and anti-people. How come these coaching centres advertise over BTV? How come the important citizens including ministers of the republic grace the different functions organised by these centres to promote their cause as well as send 'inspiring messages' to be published in their bulletins. All these have been published in the national dailies and periodicals along with photographs too. How come the leading national dailies publish their advertisements all the year round? The single reason why the coaching

centres have grown like mushroom is that the admission tests for placements demand thoroughness, comprehension and grasp of the subjects, while the board examinations do lack them. The examinees at SSC/HSC levels are offered plenty of choices and alternative questions to answer in the examination. Selective reading can assure high marks. By covering barely fifty per cent of the syllabus a student can obtain eighty per cent or more marks in an examination while he may not have thorough preparation for the remaining fifty per cent of the course.

Before making any move to abolish admission tests at college and university levels, let us stop admission tests at schools for our dear children aged between five and six years. It hurts me deeply when I find hundreds of children with ashen faces queue in single file for entering the school compound to sit for admission tests in January every year.

If the merits and marks are so important, let us apply it in places where the implementation shall be perfect. Let the armed forces, our national pride, practise it for recruiting its officer cadets. Let me suggest that after the completion of phys-

ical endurance and fitness tests followed by psychological examination, cadet officers should be selected on the basis of marks and merits of HSC results.

If the merits and marks of the public examinations are only criteria for getting things done and right the nation shall welcome and endure it. This is likely to eradicate and remove corruption, malpractice, nepotism and deprivation from the country and society. Let all recruitments and promotions in the government offices including the civil service and organisations be purely on the basis of merits and marks obtained at the relevant public examinations. For every new promotion or gradation on the job one would need to appear at the appropriate examinations conducted by the PSC of the Republic to find the meritorious ones. It is well established that merit position for a candidate is neither permanent nor stagnant and may change at each examination.

If the merits and marks were sole criteria for procurement by the government, public enterprises and private entrepreneurs the nation shall save twenty to thirty per cent of the investment on all projects and programmes; and our projects

and industries would be competitive internationally. We shall not require members of the immediate past government to occupy special cells in the jails for shady deals and rescheduling of bank loans for the defaulters.

In the past not all the colleges in the capital city and elsewhere did hold admission tests for the placement of students. The reason is simple — there are not enough places to-day for the students passing SSC examination in the colleges at HSC level.

The present admission test system at the college, university or other levels has certainly many defects and limitations and there is no reason why these cannot be rectified or eliminated. In spite of doubts and lack of faith in the public examinations conducted by the four Boards of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education at SSC and HSC levels, marks obtained at these examinations are used to start with to establish the cut off points for declaring candidates who shall sit for the tests of an individual institution. Except for some places where there are some quota for the wards of the employees and faculties, all other institutions admit students on the basis of merit position of the ad-

mission tests held. None thus far has questioned the admission tests held at BUET, or BITS or, for that matter, at Notre Dame at College or Holy Cross College or similar places having honorable traditions.

There are many valid reasons for questioning and doubting the marks obtained by a candidate at SSC and HSC level examinations. Computerization for preparing the results by the boards has surely removed corrupt practices during tabulations. Since the scripts are coded, scope for influencing individual examiner has been eliminated. Still to-date this has not been able to remove those doubts and uncertainties. These have been pointed out by many teachers, guardians and students themselves. Nevertheless, I shall list below a number of them for refreshing our memory and understanding the underlying issues:

1. The four boards do not have a uniform standard for setting questions though the syllabuses are the same.

2. The grading of the scripts is not uniform and standardized. This depends strongly on examiners' style of examining for answers and their mood. The variation in a single paper is not marginal for the same examiner if he

examines it for the second time, not to speak of the second examiner.

3. The examiners grade the answers and do not evaluate the students' individual capability.

4. Full marks obtained in practical or objective sections by a large number of candidates do look outrageous and funny when compared against the marks obtained in written sections of the paper concerned.

5. As long as unfair means such as copying, etc inside and outside the examination halls remain 'holy mission' for a section of students, guardians, invigilators and examiners, the performance of candidates in terms of 'marks' shall remain questionable. There are some examination centres which are infamous for providing facilities to these 'holy missionaries'. Local political activists patronize their more militant activists to perform this 'holy mission'; and sometimes there is a genuine competition amongst the rivals to champion the mission.

6. When the government employees, police ansars, guards and whoever is available invigilate the examination halls in the absence of the teachers (when they are on strike), it is a free for all affair for the examinees to adopt unfair means. Inexperienced teachers who ever willing were also appointed to evaluated scripts to fill the vacuum of the striking teachers. These happened a number of times in the past. Who would vouch

for the students' marks that they reflect what the numbers say. The good students really suffer in such situations.

7. What do you do about the lost scripts? This is evident from the unusual marks obtained by the deserving students in a paper asking for reexamination (it is in practice a 'scrutiny' of the script) would reveal nothing new pleasant for the victim.

8. How do you compensate a student for getting wrong grades for something going wrong somewhere even when the optical readers grade the scripts? SSC English Paper II of Dhaka Board of 1995 is an example. The grades have not been rectified yet but admission on the basis these marks is complete in some of the colleges. Ten or 12 marks would make a lot of difference for these candidates.

It would have been much more sensible for the ministry of education if it could make endeavour to remove the difficulties and limitations of present public examination systems conducted by the boards. The ministry as the guardian of our education system should rather concentrate on providing facilities for education and cause its expansion. Let the ministry be reminded that it has failed thus far to hold board examinations smoothly as well as provide safety to the courageous teachers and invigilators who had cared to stop copying etc by the students in the examination halls.