

An Elevating Call

When political crises continuing interminably for over two years has all but robbed us of our capacity to see somewhat beyond our nose, a five-nation seminar in Dhaka on Saturday brought in a whiff of fresh breeze sooth-ing our soul. Remaking education in South Asia: Making a South Asian University — the very subject they talked about promises a respite from the claustrophobic impositions on our society, specially education.

Professor Rehman Sobhan said we haven't had a chance to try our own capacities in education — the administration hasn't as much as read through the pages of the extensive Task Force Report on education. But isn't this neglect quite in line with the treatment successive governments meted out to the Khuda Commission Report? This report was avoided very consistently as if it were taboo.

The suggestion that came up from the proceedings of the seminar as its key-nos — for an expansion of the spectrum of our education beyond national boundaries and petty nationalist ideals, is a call to open our closed minds to mankind's redeeming legacies of knowledge and humanity — love for the planet and all that constitute it. This is an elevating idea very timely focussed on.

Education in Bangladesh is not yet infected by nationalist Jingoism and other limiting influences. The highly compartmentalised education is weighted on the side of religious or non-modern backward-looking dogma-based teaching. And the remaining general and secular schooling is not what it seems or it could have been. The communal underpinnings fail to inspire one to love one's own people and the land that holds them. It is largely an education not to integrate but to divide.

It is a problem not quite peculiar to Bangladesh. Other nations would at best be baffled by certain facts of our education.

We appeal to the enlightened participants of the seminar and other thinkers and activists in the education sector to first comprehend the anti-education and anti-culture elements prevalent in the region and set things on the right track.

After the Trade Fair

The Dhaka International Trade Fair '96 has been a big success by past standards. Some of the impressions left on those who could pay a visit to it are bound to linger and circulate for a good length of time. A big hand to the organisers who could bring it at par with international fairs organised from time to time by countries in the South Asia region.

The sale proceeds and the collection of gate money and custom duties, estimated at Tk 150 crore and Tk 6,180,740 and Tk 75 lakh respectively, were rather substantial. And there has been a repatriation of incomes by the foreign exhibitors who thereby formed an idea of the market-size here.

But an international fair's success has to be measured beyond the immediacy of the consumer products soaked up by a buying public drawn by the appeal of an international trade fair.

The acquaintance with the range and quality of our own products and an understanding of where these stood in relation to the items manufactured by other countries have been educative no doubt but that's not all there is to the potency of a modern trade fair. It is a powerful medium to create new business by signing up fresh contracts and to pave the way for investment in collaborative projects.

In both these areas there have been very modest gains through the Dhaka fair: export orders to the tune of Tk 25 crore were negotiated with Japan for toys and with the UK for our ceramic products. Discussions are to be begun soon with a Thai company for a medical clinic and an electronic goods plant here.

Such things would have perhaps come in steadily if we had the foreign manufacturers in our now-operating two export processing zones set up their shops at the Dhaka fair. The exposition of their exportables could help win good business for them and perhaps a bigger foreign investment for the EPZs.

Let's make up for this with the help of a world trade centre we are going to have in Dhaka as a permanent venue for the display of our products.

Be Transparent

Privatisation of 11 more BTMC mills is said to be on the anvil. In an earlier phase, out of 10 units attempted to be divested, only six could be sold to the private sector. At that rate of success, one tends to keep one's fingers crossed over the next phase of privatisation.

These units, loss-making as they had been for years, were a constant drag on the national exchequer. So obsolete have their machinery become that they are devoid of any possibility of reaching a break-even point without a sizeable BMR. The basic question is: why such losing concerns would generate any interest in the private sector unless there is a guarantee for fiscal and credit facilities attached to the offers?

We do not think, the surplus employees need to resist the process if, as promised, safety-net is provided to them after retrenchment.

Having said that, let's urge the Textiles Ministry to make sure that the tendering is transparent both for outright sale as well as for dismantling the unsold units to recover their full scrap value. Even where auction is involved we must be careful not to dispose of any unit at a throw-away price.

Palestinian Election — Symbol of Statehood

Apart from the fact that Palestinians have got back Gaza Strip and most of West Bank towns and villages, they have also scored initial victory in terms of confirming their solid claim on East Jerusalem through holding of general election there

SLOWLY but steadily the Palestinians are moving towards their final goal — establishment of the Palestinian state. January 20, 1996 remains a historic day for the Palestinians. On this memorable day the Palestinians 'tasted' the first flavour of Palestinian state which, of course, stands to be materialised in the near future. Except some violence in Hebron and some incidences in East Jerusalem mainly due to excess committed by Israeli security forces, election was held in a quiet atmosphere. Turnout was heavy — indeed more than 80 per cent in West Bank and about 90 per cent in Gaza. This was a total defeat for Hamas as it challenged PLO and declared that it would claim victory if the turnout was less than 50 per cent. The heavy turnout indeed endorsed Arafat's peace process and now he should be in a position to move forward with stronger support and confidence.

Palestinians had enough reasons to celebrate their victory. It was the first general election for the Palestinians which enabled them to democratically elect their President and the 88-member Legislative Council. Indeed, this is the first democratically elected government for the Palestinians.

Though there were a number of complaints from Arafat's opposition candidates about election irregularities for which the recounting of votes was ordered, the elec-

tion appeared, as per reports of the Foreign Election Monitoring Groups, free and fair. Undoubtedly this was the first election for Palestinians and some irregularities could not be ruled out. Arafat's Fatah Group might have tried to get overall majority in the Legislative Council but reports of the Election Monitoring Groups did not indicate any rigging.

The other interesting part of the Palestinian election was that some women also contested; indeed, Arafat was challenged by a woman — Samiha Khalil — a 70-year old activist. She was indeed able to secure slightly less than 10 per cent of the votes which is considerable in the backdrop of the overall situation in the M-East. It is still more interesting that a woman — Hanan Ashrawi — a human rights activist, was elected from East Jerusalem with comfortable margin and might lead a sizeable opposition in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Latest election results show that Arafat's Fatah Group won 50 seats in 88-member Legislative Council leaving 38 to independent and minority members. Arafat would, therefore, have to face a strong opposition in the Legislative Council and this would cut down Arafat's personal maneuver-

ability in the political and economic decisions.

Despite some irregularities, the real democratic process has set in this part of the Middle East, which may gradually find its way into the other areas — hopefully without much violence. Here the US may play a significant role for establishing or encouraging democracy in some other states of Middle East as it has good relations with some of

salem, virtually agreed to ultimately cede this part of Jerusalem to the Palestinians. Indeed, Shimon Peres had no alternative. Without East Jerusalem to Palestinians there can be no peace in ME. This is why Shimon Peres opted for gradual softening of present Israeli stand on East Jerusalem issue. However, Israeli authorities being conscious of the situation started building up new Israeli

lence in Israel proper as it has become more or less evident that Israel would have to cede East Jerusalem to Palestinians.

The negotiations of the final status of the occupied territories including Jerusalem must start from May '96. This has put Shimon Peres into a dilemma as he has to face Israeli general election in October-November '96. One idea is to hold general election in May and obtain fresh mandate which will enable Shimon Peres to negotiate with Palestinians with more confidence and flexibility. According to the latest opinion poll, Shimon Peres and his Labour Party stand far ahead of Likud. May '96 may be an appropriate time for Labour to go for the general election. Once Shimon Peres gets the clear majority in the Knesset which is almost certain under the present situation, it would be far easier for him to make suitable concessions to the Palestinians and also to Syrians during the forthcoming negotiations.

As Arafat has already got clear mandate, fresh mandate for Shimon Peres appears necessary. In case the peace negotiations start in May, and the demands for transfer of East Jerusalem to Palestinians and Golan Height to Syrians

come up in the negotiations, the stand of Israelis on these issues may harden and thereby cut down/reduce the popularity of Shimon Peres and his Labour Party. Thus the idea for holding early general election seems quite appropriate.

The first mandate for Shimon Peres would put him at par with Arafat in terms of people's support for the peace process which is very important for comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

Arafat's crushing victory has also cleared the way for PLO to drop the specific provision from the PLO Charter that deals with the destruction of Israel. Earlier the Palestine National Council — the PLO parliament in exile — could not make any decision on this as many members opposed any change in the PLO Charter. After PLO's signing of Washington Declaration, this provision of PLO Charter became invalid as both the Palestinians and Israelis decided to live as neighbours. Indeed, Israeli authority is now allowing the Palestine National Council members to return to the occupied territories to facilitate holding of the meeting of the Palestine National Council so that it could drop that specific provision in the PLO Charter.

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you know how much your Bhau likes fresh cauliflower;

went to drop my son to school, yes! I sort of married late;

had to give Amma (you know mother-in-law) a lift back home.

Soon the campus has a bazaar, a school but, of course, no management in its right sense should change your mother-in-law. A late Latif is, however, un-perturbed by the changes. He now thinks this new bazaar is too expensive or he owes so much to a certain shop that he has to avoid the bazaar altogether. The school, of course, does not suit his child; not vice versa. So, he ends up in another *haat*, another school and a bagful of excuses.

Does his late arrival mean that the employee stays till 7 PM to make up for his 11 o'clock start? No, Sir-reel He is a man of principle and will board his homebound vehicle, parked outside his office blocking all other traffic for two hours, to the dot on time. After all, would it not be inhuman to delay the bus driver, he, too, has a family and a social life, you know.



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

them. Only thing the US has to do is to give priority to having democratic process in those states over its other strategic and political interests.

Apart from the fact that Palestinians have got back Gaza Strip and most of West Bank towns and villages, they have also scored initial victory in terms of confirming their solid claim on East Jerusalem through holding of general election there along with the rest of West Bank and Gaza. Israeli authorities, by agreeing to Palestinian general election in East Jeru-

usalem, virtually agreed to encroaching on big chunk of land in the suburbs of East Jerusalem. The idea is to grab as much land as possible from East Jerusalem before it is handed over to the Palestinians.

This is a victory for Shimon Peres also as through Arafat's landslide victory with 88 per cent votes in his favour, the peace process got overwhelming endorsement from the Palestinians. Hamas will now lose more members to PLO. However, Shimon Peres will have to face rightists' demonstration and vio-

It's Divine to be Late

Pinch of Salt

by Chintito

being late is that if you can get away with it a couple of times, you not only ponder about making it a habit, but actually curse yourself for not

thinking about it any earlier and having been on time so many times.

Perhaps you have been on time to some places on a few



SHANTU '96

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

General elections and constitutional amendments

Sir, Under a multi-party democratic system, it is imperative that all concerned including the ruling and the opposition parties and the people should take part in the general elections spontaneously and the voters should cast their votes without fear, favour or ill-will towards anybody.

Controversy over caretaker government or 'no caretaker government', unilateral general elections, army takeover, hartals and strikes at the cost of untold sufferings of the people cannot help us get rid of the present political impasse in the country.

The present political atmosphere and law and order situation in the country is not conducive to holding a free, fair, meaningful and credible general elections.

We do not know whom to blame? Let us leave the matter to the future historians to decide.

We do not like continued hartals and strikes, rail-roadways blockade by the opposition — Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party and others — on the one hand, and unilateral general elections by the ruling BNP on the other. We abhor the confrontation between the ruling and opposition parties and among the people good for nothing.

Under the present complex and deteriorating situation, it is only and only the people's vote which can resolve this political crisis.

Our Constitution tells us clearly how we can amend our Constitution vide Article No. 142. But our Constitution does not tell us whether we are required to make a 'de facto' or a 'post facto' amendments in our Constitution. Our Constitution is totally silent on the matter. So, constitutionally and lawfully, we can make 'de facto' and 'post facto' amendments in our Constitution as per Article No. 142 as and when

necessary.

So let us hold a free, fair, meaningful and credible general elections under a caretaker government either headed by Chief Justice of Bangladesh Mr. M. Afzal or former Acting President Mr. Shahabuddin Ahmed, make necessary 'post facto' amendments in our Constitution in the greatest interest of the nation and save our democracy and country from an impending disaster.

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English-medium schools

Sir, Your report, in the issue of January 13, about Dhaka's private schools and the editorial in which you commented upon them is not the whole truth. Yes, there may be many schools who are charging exorbitant fees and huge amounts as "donations". But then why are so many people ready to pay these huge sums for their children's schooling? Why are the services of these schools so much in demand that they can set their own fees and still have students clamouring at their doors? The simple answer is that many (I do not say all) of these schools provide the services that guardians and parents want.

Your reporter quoted the adverse opinion of some parents regarding these schools, but then, why were these persons there, outside the school gates, ready to pay the horrendous fees required for admission to them? Their opinion about private schools is not shared by everyone who has children in them. Many of these schools, even the ones that are staffed by teachers who lack formal training, are far better than the government schools.

Government schools are under-funded, under-staffed, ill-equipped and over-crowded and the education they provide is some dare say 'no education at all.' If you think the teachers in the pri-

vate schools are untrained, what would you call those teachers in the government schools who boast B.Ed and M.Ed degrees and still appear to be uneducated and untrained? What would you call those teachers who have "received training" at government institutions and various foreign countries under aid programmes but to whom all of this expensive training has been like water off a duck's back? If you are accusing the teachers of private schools of running private tuition dens, spare a glance for what government school teachers do — and not government school teachers alone but government college teachers too. Private tuition run by them is now an industry worth millions of takas. Why should you blame private school teacher for doing something he/she is allowed by her employers to do, unlike a government teacher who is expressly forbidden by the rules to engage in private tuition of his own pupils?

The burgeoning, the proliferation, of private schools in the country generally and in Dhaka particularly is the operation of an economic law. Where there is a strong demand for something, the demand will be supplied. In this case, the blame, if blame there is, should be laid at the door of those who allowed the demand to grow. Had the government, with tax money, been able to give us nice clean schools with trained, caring teachers not a single private school would ever have been able to make money out of this business. No government in Bangladesh for perhaps decades will be able to do that. Meanwhile, what would you like the parents of children to do? Send our children to the bedlams that the Education Directorate runs under the name of schools? This is particularly hard for the parent who is, by Bangladeshi standards, well-to-do. I know that, according to the philosophy of our many "intellectuals," one should not have sympathy for the rich. But, had there been no private schools, imagine the frame of mind of a self-made businessman, or even a low-paid professional willing to make sacrifices for his children, who has the money to pay for a better sort of education and yet cannot find a good school to send his or her child to.

No, government should not meddle in this matter. The private schools are necessary and should be allowed to operate with the minimum of state regulation. Rather than be regulated by the gov-

ernment they should be left as right now, at the mercy of market forces. The bad among them will be weeded out by the consumer and the good left to prosper. What is felt to be bad in the good ones (e.g., the disregard of national themes in the curricula of the English medium school) will also in time correct itself. The English medium schools who are now using Western or Indian textbooks will stop using them once guardians start complaining and our own publishers start producing useable textbooks in English. The reason why we have no textbooks of our own is that the market so far has remained too small for them.

Once the market can support the production of Bangladeshi books they will certainly be produced. Those who protest over much about the existence of English medium schools ignore the popular demand for them; ignore the reason why they were revived after being banned in the early seventies. It is all very well to decry and belittle an English-medium education for our children in the abstract. In practice everyone knows that the English language, a GCE, or a degree from a Western country opens doors that a vernacular education does not.

Snearing at English-medium education is only part of that kind of hypocrisy whereby our politicians, intellectuals and our national elite speak about the importance of the national language in public and then go home and mail applications to American universities for their children.

The solution to the problem that you have mentioned is not to suppress the private schools or the English-medium schools but to allow them to grow and develop and increase in number. Once there are enough schools for everybody the costs will come down and the quality (following another economic law) will go up. To eventually have enough schools for everybody is something that the government cannot do, but the private sector can. If getting an education in English is a bad thing, education in English will disappear once its worthlessness is demonstrated and its need is not felt. But as long as its need is demonstrated and school education in English will

remain. The government can ban English schools but such a ban will not stop Bangladeshi from sending their children abroad or to neighbouring India, as many are doing even now, as long as they feel that it is something worth investing in.

A concerned citizen
Rajshahi

Oath and the Constitution

Sir, I have noticed with interest the recent utterances of a minister stating that, the government and the Chief Election Commissioner took oath to protect the Constitution, and therefore, they were oath-bound to hold the election even unilaterally. In my opinion, the minister has mixed up the END with the MEANS. "Oath" or "Constitution" were adopted as a means to an end only. The ultimate end is the "Country and welfare of its People".

Under the present political impasse, neither any oath nor the Constitution are acting as means to achieve the ultimate end. As such, repeating the same "tune" time and again, will not help meet the desired end. May I draw the attention of the minister concerned to the following instances when the people rose to the occasion and defied the oath and the Constitution to meet the ultimate objective — "Freedom of Bangladesh".

a) The Chief Justice of erstwhile East Pakistan refused to administer oath to notorious Tikka Khan in 1971 even though he took oath to do so.