

## For the Last Time, Please

The nation finds itself on a perennial escalator in its never-ending quest for an appropriate education policy. It's a shame that even after quarter of a century since the birth of Bangladesh, we have this startling realisation that nearly a whole generation of our youngsters have been brought up on ad-hoc educational policies and systemic tinkers of all sorts. Commissions and committees were constituted, reports and recommendations heaped, and a whole range of catch-words flowed as noisily as these ebbed into whimpers: time-conforming, pragmatic, utilitarian, non-elitist yet selective at the higher level, symbiotic of secular and religious studies, bi-lingual and what not. It is time we were crying hoarse to tune into, and it is time that we lost all the way.

At a very serious level, the chronic educational indecisiveness basically originated in the myopic and bigoted political ethos, a concoction between authoritarianism and democracy and awkward tinkering with the Constitution all rolled into one. Lack of a consensual, modernist and stable political will that could place the necessary courage of conviction behind the educational reform process was pronounced.

Understandably, it is the totality of this messed up scenario that has prompted the present government to constitute the National Education Committee for the formulation of an education policy by April 30 of the current year. Even though it has been called a 'committee' and not a 'commission', apparently to emphasise the sharpness and specificity of the government's commitment to update the Qudrat-e-Khuda commission report of 1974, it is obviously manned in an unwieldy fashion. Its 54 members makes it evidently look like a huge commission and not a committee. We would have much liked it to be a compact body of experts including persons having intimate knowledge of successful educational models elsewhere, operational innovators and thoughtful fund-raisers.

We already have the intellectual inputs, the lessons of the past and researched output on the subject. We needn't go through an incubator all over again. Importantly, we need to associate the opposition with the process. For, we want this to be the last body on educational reform, conclusive in its work.

## Fighting the Cold

With the mercury registering a plunge to four degrees Celsius in the country's north, life there has been hit hard. Particularly for the poor, the cold waves have arrived as a messenger of acute sufferings and even death. Indeed, different dailies have carried reports of a number of deaths caused by the severe wintry chill. We are happy to learn that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is seized of the situation and has issued instructions for distributing warm clothes among the very poor in the 10 northern districts. However, we do not know about the quantity of warm wear on the way nor are we told how soon those will reach the chill-stricken people. But we can understand that a small volume of winter garments or any delay in sending them will simply fail to prevent more deaths.

Most importantly, there is a need to develop a defence mechanism against the wintry onslaught by gearing up the administrative machinery for the task. That mechanism, to our mind, should include an immediate arrangement for sheltering the poor who are badly exposed to cold. One ready solution is to suspend classes and use all the school buildings or public houses for this purpose. At the same time they must be given food, so that both hunger and winter cannot combine together to strike a death blow. The arrangements should remain in place till the cold wave subsides.

Then, of course, we have to think of a long-term cold spell management system for the north, for this is after all a yearly phenomenon there. It is worrying that the secondhand winter garments that used to be of immense help to the poor are no longer adequately available. If there are a few, they are costly — beyond the affordability of the poor. We suggest that the import of those cheap but very useful clothes be made duty-free or at least concessionary. This is a measure that, we think, can go a long way in helping the poor to fight cold spells in the future.

## Atrocious

Incidents of slums getting reduced to ashes by fire are nothing new. Some of the fires may have originated accidentally, but many more were caused deliberately. The blaze in Segun Bagicha slum, reports say, has been a clear case of arson. And what a shame, the slum which had sprawled on a land area that was allocated to a prestigious association of the country had to perish so tragically!

If eviction was the goal, why such ruthless ferocity was necessary? That the slum-dwellers' thatched houses were dismantled was cruel enough. Then those were burnt down — as if to deliver the *coup de grace*. We don't want to enter into the argument who met whom before going for the dismantling. We are interested to know if the slum-dwellers, who clearly had no legal basis or right to live there, were given enough time to remove their structures. Evidently, after dismantling they got no time to remove those structures.

Now, slum-dwellers are often subjected to inhuman atrocities by the same vested interests who use them to advance their cause — mainly to occupy government lands. In this case, the ownership of land is not disputed but the method applied for eviction has been obnoxiously atrocious. Can we demand compensation for the lost properties of those unfortunate people and punishment of those responsible for arson?

# D Minus 10: Issues Vs Muck-raking

With 10 days to go before the people exercise their right of adult franchise one would expect the "Accountability Brigade" to give way to the people's mandate but muck-raking has not only given them a fresh lease of life but also a new dimension to democratic mores in Pakistan.

Instead of taking the moral high ground on issues, our leaders seem to specialise in travelling the low road in assuming that character assassination would gain them electoral victory on February 3. Instead of being apprised of what our candidates can do for the nation, what we are getting to hear mostly is how awful the other person is and how unsuitable for holding office. From time to time issues do surface to be beaten down by the media, hungry for what one can safely label as the "Sita-White syndrome" of tarring and feathering one's opponents. We are stuck in the freeze-frame of negative politics whereas we should be engaged in a whole-some debate on issues of importance to the nation, both internally and externally. This has given further ammunition to the detractors of holding the elections at all, propounding the advisability for having accountability (Ehtasab) first. With 10 days to go before the people exercise their right of adult franchise one would expect the "Accountability Brigade" to give way to the people's mandate but muck-raking has not only given them a fresh lease of life but also a new dimension to democratic mores in Pakistan. It is already frustrating to envisage the post-elections period when the losers will have nothing further to lose and the winners will have full control over the official media. If all our leaders have a feel of clay, where do we go to seek leadership that will take Pakistan safely into the 21st century?

In the second Pathfinder Poll (5 Jan-15 Jan 97) done in 30 cities and towns across the country, Research & Collection Services (Pvt) Ltd (RCS) continued to gather data on the most important issues facing the country, among them (1) unemployment (2) inflation (3) corruption (4) illiteracy (5) poor health system (6) restriction on freedom of expression and (7) autocratic ruling class. Whereas in the first Pathfinder Poll (26 Dec 96-04 Jan 97) 2757 persons were tar-

gent to 'religious views'.

Difference between the first and second Pathfinder Poll was at most plus minus 3-5 per cent, acceptable in most countries.

Needless to say the economy has pride of place in everyone's book of worries. To the credit of the Caretaker Government they have managed to arrest the steep decline and flatten the spiral leading to absolute disaster. However far-reaching reforms is not the mandate or within the capabilities of the interim government, that must remain the prerogative of an elected government in keeping with what can be absorbed by the electorate. Jobs have increasingly become scarce while prices have registered an exorbitant increase. Our debt repayment has got more acute as expenditures have far exceeded

exercise in futility without the cleansing of the body politic. On the other hand, elections is in itself a form of accountability, not going through the exercise means discounting the genius of the people and casting doubt on the whole democratic process. Whereas accountability is necessary, elections are more necessary to sustain democracy in a country with a sorry history in this respect. We cannot afford a vacuum where a contrived marriage can help any adventurer to rule the roost, this is what happened when Benazir abdicated as PM in all but name in favour of Asif Zardari, who along with his free-loading, free-booting friends ran the government through a *de facto* Cabinet with himself as *de facto* PM and monarch rolled into one, com-

missioner.

This can be primarily staffed by rotating defence forces personnel on (very) short stints of duty. Steps must be taken to further streamline the laws of the land and strengthen the judiciary so that white collar criminals cannot escape retribution because of legal loopholes. A comprehensive plan to recover money from loan defaulters as well as those who have had their loans written off would be useful. Any day of the week you can see these thieves marrying off their children at lavish parties which royalty would be hard put to emulate.

These shameless people have the audacity to flout their thievery in a country where people have difficulty getting "Teen Sukhi Roti" (three pieces of bread) every day. Their entire property and assets must be confiscated, the same punishment being reserved for those officials who try and help them hide their ill-gotten wealth.

While raising personal character issues is both demeaning and disgusting, this is the first time personalities have been character assassinated so systematically. Stung by Imran constantly equating PML (N) with PPP with respect to corruption, PML (N) raised the "Sita-White" factor.

Tehrek-e-Insaaf responded in kind. "Dirty Tricks" was previously the prerogative of the Bhutto clan, they never have qualms about maligning their opponents with anything that suits their convoluted minds. Asif Zardari being by far the most innovative. Instead of lip-service and pious wishes, the electorate would be far happier with a concise plan by the political parties that would define a firm commitment along the lines of the Accountability (Ehtasab) Act. Drastic police reforms include revamping and re-focusing the intelligence agencies, disbanding of the FIA and replacement by a new organisation, part of which can be directly under the Ehtasab

## AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

revenues, the collection of which has been very much less than satisfactory. The elected government will, therefore, have its hands full rejuvenating the economy while controlling expenditures and collecting on taxes. The approach has to be both dynamic and innovative, impossible for those not having the support of the electorate. In the present electoral campaign only PML (N) has really come out with what can be considered as serious proposals for tackling the economy, the solid support from the electorate (31 per cent overall) is a recognition of their leader's ability and commitment to that end.

Of great concern to the electorate is "corruption". The reason accountability is a high priority for the masses because they feel elections will just bring back the same old faces and the same old practices, an

plete with the buggy that he used to ride the 200 yards from the PM House to the specially constructed polo ground within the premises.

While the next elected government has to ensure accountability, unfortunately post-elections things fall into the usual routine where the elected representatives get into the act of looting the treasury by various means, Zardari being by far the most innovative. Instead of lip-service and pious wishes, the electorate would be far happier with a concise plan by the political parties that would define a firm commitment along the lines of the Accountability (Ehtasab) Act. Drastic police reforms include revamping and re-focusing the intelligence agencies, disbanding of the FIA and replacement by a new organisation, part of which can be directly under the Ehtasab

## Party Politics and Foreign Policy Issues: Exploring the Links

by Badrul Hassan

against Bosnian Muslims.

These types of findings are presented here to demonstrate the inconsistent public response in Bangladesh about external affairs. This is because outside the government the opposition political parties constitute the major institutions who concern themselves with the issues of foreign policy and diplomacy. Apparently, their structural weakness and perhaps lack of experience and specialized competence oblige them to confine their role only to those external affairs having more connotations with the domestic political climate. They care little to comment on the policies of the World Bank, IMF, WTO etc., but they are very keen about every foreign policy issue relating to India.

In Indo-Bangladesh relations public interaction is a very important factor. Due to geopolitical vulnerability the

continuity in major issues of foreign policy formulation is an important precondition for the advancement of a country... It is high time for the political parties in Bangladesh to come forward and work together.

Bangladesh has protested against this. But we have completely different experiences in case of push-back from India. People are also hardly interested about the Rohingya refugees' illegal migration to Bangladesh which has created various socio-economic and environmental damages for us.

After the demolition of Babri Mosque in India, the Muslims of Bangladesh were naturally hurt but many of them reacted violently; the existing regime rather exploited the situation to extinguish the opposition's agitation, with a view to shifting the attention of the people from anti-government movement. Later in 1994, some fundamentalist political parties and organizations took a programme of long march towards the Indian border which ended with five deaths and a few hundred injuries after clash with the police on duty. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, four mosques of the sixteenth century were destroyed by the Serbs. But the people here did not behave in the manner they did in case of Babri Mosque. Even most of the population was indifferent to the cruelty

India factor has become the most important issue in the foreign policy formulation of Bangladesh. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh, India gave logistic and moral support to Bangladesh. In order to intensify "special relationship" with India, a 25-year Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation was signed on 19 March, 1972. Since then, the treaty has been regarded as an influential political weapon in Bangladesh. Almost every political party politicized the treaty whenever they thought it necessary! Initially, this was happening due to the failure of Bangladesh Awami League, then ruling party; they chose not to give publicity to the treaty immediately after its signing which could have enlightened the people about it. The treaty was ratified by the Parliament after the election of 1973. But Awami League could not avert criticism even after 20 years of signing the treaty.

On the other hand, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), since its creation has apparently taken an anti-Indian stance. The BNP was always vo-

cal against the friendship treaty. They always used the treaty as a political tool to corner their political opponent.

Albeit BNP alleged the treaty as against national interest and as a threat to national security, they never took any initiative to make the treaty null and void.

During the tenure of the last caretaker government Radio, Television and other mass media were comparatively free. The media had the chance to question the accountability of major political parties for the first time in Bangladesh. Once again the Friendship Treaty became an important issue for the election campaign. To get ride of the 'India-aligned' allegation Awami League declared their position not to renew the treaty. This time BNP perhaps failed to woo the voters with campaign against the treaty which seemingly had its impact on the

ment in favour of maintaining bilateral cooperation with India. But their sincerity is not beyond question. Sheikh Hasina also perhaps does not want to take unilateral responsibility to conclude any major treaty on either facilitating transit or importing electricity from India. She is always referring to the initiatives taken by the previous BNP government.

The former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia often used 'Pakistan card' against India. But it did not work at all. Moreover, BNP's diplomacy on Farakka issue proved inept. They rejected the Indian proposal for opening of Chittagong port and transit movement of the Indian goods through Bangladesh, but renewed an inland water transit and trade protocol between Bangladesh and India on 22 August, 1995 for the next two years. Under the agreement, water vessels of Bangladesh would use Calcutta Port of India while

Indian water vessels would use Narayanganj Port of Bangladesh [The Daily Star, 23 August 1995]. They have signed the SAPTA with a view to expand trade among the SAARC countries. The treaty has gone into effect from 8 December 1995 on the tenth anniversary of the SAARC. The article 12 of the treaty directly supports to facilitate transit movement of goods through the SAARC countries.

In January 1980, President Ziaur Rahman was the first leader to visit India after Indira Gandhi's return to power. He attended the conference of The United Nations International Development (UNIDO) in New Delhi. To initiate cooperation with India he wanted to export natural gas to India without surveying the reserve position at home. His government conceded most favoured nation (MFN) treatment to India according to the third trade agreement signed on 4 October 1980. He exported fertiliser to India and imported coal for the energy sector. He also concluded an agreement to export furnace oil to India. But he failed to export natural gas

to India. The writer has recently completed MSS in International Relations from the University of Dhaka.

and became the victim of his own propaganda. In fact, he understood the underlying importance of cooperation with India and other South Asian countries, albeit he used to bluster against so called 'foreign master' as a political strategy. But the present opposition, led by former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, is against neither importing electricity from nor conceding transit facility to India. In an interview with the Saudi Gazette, Begum Zia admitted the necessity of the transit relations. But she is suspicious about Indian intention and is against any such relations blaming the government's foreign policy as 'subversive'. She is also reluctant to share with any of the government proposals taken in relation to India.

Political parties in Bangladesh tend to be opportunistic in every matter. They are more conscious in gaining cheap applause rather than opting for benefits of the country. Indeed, BNP needs an issue to initiate anti-government political programmes. They perhaps perceive any anti-Indian sentiment as a potential instrument for the anti-government movement. But they should consider this in the light of the previous election.

Capricious decision-making in the government offices has negative impact in every sphere of policy formulation in Bangladesh. Continuity in major issues of foreign policy formulation is an important precondition for the advancement of a country. In the changing international system, Bangladesh should maintain continuity in the major issues of diplomacy. It is high time for the political parties in Bangladesh to come forward and work together. Both government and opposition should design their foreign policy in the frame of economic diplomacy. They should take some unanimous decision on important national issues which must not be subject to change with the change of the government for political antagonism or parochial politics.

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which I submitted through 'proper channel' in 1995 and which was sent by the then DG to the section concerned for 'immediate action' was never considered. However, I didn't lose heart. I followed it up with another effort stating my case through proper channel in 1996, and it too, was directed to the section by the then DG Prof Rashida Begum for 'immediate action'.

At that time some half-a-dozen posts of lecturers in the colleges of Dhaka were lying vacant following promotions. Yet my case was not considered. Meanwhile after a period of long wait, teachers selected through the 16th BCS examination got appointed, and a woman was posted at a college in Dhaka city as lecturer in English.

Being disappointed and frustrated, I have stopped pursuing my file which, I think, by now has found its way to the cold storage of the Directorate where, as the 'suffering citizen'

has stated, you can buy anything for you by giving money. However, if you are a kin of somebody (minister, MP, secretary and the like), you are sure to tell an entirely different tale.

What is all the more sickening is the behaviour of the dealing assistants, who seem to be the 'bosses' of the office. They don't even show slightest respect to the teachers who come from distant places of the country with various problems.

The present government has promised transparency in all public affairs. May I request our Prime Minister to look into the affairs at the Ministry of Education and its organs so that she can come up with a decision regarding transfers of teachers to end the tale of misery, shame and woe of the likes of me who have the urge to follow a dream in life?

A Dejected Citizen  
Dhaka

## To the Editor...

### A further request to PSC

Sir, I am writing in support of the views expressed by Ms Naureen Tabassum in her letter titled "A request to PSC" on 7 January.

There is no denying the fact that a career diplomat must be thoroughly conversant with English, and if possible, with other UN languages. Some candidates selected for Foreign Service through BCS examination in recent years are too weak in English, even to correspond accurately.

How can a diplomat with only a rudimentary grasp of English assert the identity of the country on a platform of challenge and competition?

It is high time the PSC ascertained the level of English of those candidates putting Foreign Affairs on top of their choice. In addition to this, candidates having knowledge of French, German, or other for-

eign languages should be given preference in viva-voce.

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### Introduction of plastic surgery unit

Sir, Thanks to Interplast of Italy and Prof Morelli for recently treating patients needlessly of cost in our country. From a leading daily, we came to know that there was an enormous rush of patients of this kind, especially with burn injuries.

If the young physicians of our country can be trained in this field, it would be possible to treat those patients by them. So, it is essential that our government be prepared to arrange training for them and introduce plastic surgery units in the developed hospitals of the country.

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### 'Red-taped' Education"

Sir, We are fast travelling back to the primitive days when we lived in caves and when raihan was right. This, I maintain in response to the letter titled "Red-taped Education" published in the DS on January 15, 1997. As one who has already passed through the plights mentioned in the letter, I have every sympathy for him.

His is a case of dream and idealism clashing with the cruel and bizarre world of experience that pitilessly destroys all that is good and innocent. However, here I would like to narrate my own experience at the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education under the Ministry of Education in the hope that it will help the "suffering citizen" to feel that he is not alone in his suffering.

I have been teaching English as lecturer for more than three

years in a government college located at a district headquarters some 50 miles away from Dhaka. Although the placement upset me (for I secured one of the top slots on the subject-wise merit list of the 14th BCS held in 1992-93), I accepted