

Conference of Young Professionals & Entrepreneurs: A Follow-up Bangladesh towards 21st Century

by Maqsoodul Haque

I propose an agenda for radical change in our socio-political environment by raising the demand for STATE POWER 2010: The raising of awareness and consciousness to a simple argument that, because our leaders and intellectuals have failed in their responsibility, the youth of Bangladesh therefore should be encouraged and propelled with incentives to capture state power by the year 2010.

It was an honour to be able to participate in the Conference of Young Professionals & Entrepreneurs organised by The Daily Star on the 28th of December 1997. Congratulations to editor Mahfuz Anam for allowing this brain storming session, dedicating quality space in The Daily Star exclusively for the young, and thereafter carrying the message forward by calling 1998 the year of the Professional Entrepreneurs.

I tend to think of myself as a radical cultural activist, and therefore it was touching to note, during the conference, there were those who thought, that given the time wasted by our establishment, our initiative should now be focused not on 'ordinary' but 'radical' ideas. Radicalism as opposed to 'radical chic' is a form of liberal extremism that not many in Bangladesh have been able to appreciate or encourage. If one is a radical, he/she has got to be prepared to pay the price for it. The radical tradition has been one of swimming against the current — not an entirely enviable place to be in if you are caught in a mighty current of the so-called 'popular sentiments'!

This piece therefore will be a radical and cultural overview of the conference — because culture, contrary to popular misconception, is not merely writing poetry, recitation or dance. Culture today has a broader connotation as it is a study of human relationship with all its inherent strength, opportunities, weaknesses and threats.

The Culture of Political Correctness

To begin, if we are to see ourselves as passengers in the 'global bus' the first question that we need to ask ourselves is — how much do we understand the global culture in relation to our native culture? Do we have any idea about the culture of 'political correctness' that goes hand in hand with the term 'globalisation'?

The culture of political correctness stresses that, in the quest for a peaceful and productive world, any discrimination, whether that be of sex, colour, creed, religion, social standing, language, educational or cultural background and, most importantly, age, MUST be resisted.

Keeping those lofty and fair ideals into consideration, The Daily Star conference was somewhat 'politically incorrect' in that it limited interaction among young people within the 'physical' age bracket of 25 to 35. Simply because one has had the privilege of 'landing' on planet earth a few years ahead of somebody else, gives the former NO God given right to bask in complacency, and expect the less fortunate i.e. the ones that have arrived courtesy a 'delayed flight' to view him or her with awe, respect and servility. How successfully or unsuccessfully one conducts himself or herself during his time on earth has lot to do with how he or she uses cu-

lulative experience, which in turn negates the experience of physical age to a secondary significance. No yardstick, theory or apparatus is however in place, to convincingly measure experience being a monopoly for someone who by the physical definition of age is a 'lot older'. If we do so, we will be denying ourselves and discriminating among others, the prodigies in our society. Time warp has been the traditional enemy of Bangladesh.

Our Conflicting Subcultures

Our 'culture of dependency' which is enforced with maniacal obsession by those who promote the cult of 'seniors' and 'juniors', 'boro bhais' and 'chhoto bhais' etc., 'Sir', 'hujur', 'Madam' etc., have all left us to the ominous spectre of a legacy of age related arrogance, that has only created tension and confusions.

The 'culture of retribution' prohibits something like this Daily Star's 'speak up' campaign as bordering on impertinence or 'beyadabi' — whilst we reel in shock when we note, that 'adabi' or pertinence is a form of mental oppression or discrimination.

The 'culture of compulsion', on the other hand, dictates our young to 'respect' their 'elders' without question. Respect is not a one way traffic — you are to offer respect, to solicit respect are sayings from the Koran. How much do we respect our young and why should they be respecting us are among many of the questions that must be raised?

My experience of working for/with the youth of Bangladesh for a long time allows me to state with a degree of certainty, that a generational revolt is in the offing if we cannot ward off this threat called 'globalisation'. It will be increasingly difficult for us if we do not delve deep, and try to fathom as to what ails the young in Bangladesh. If we are to talk about 'corrective measures', those measures ought not to be used to correct the young, but ourselves, in a world where the young are asked to make the difference and importantly the decisions.

The problem of our young is, they feel alienated in the environment that they live, as our socio political failures have wrecked havoc to their lives and left them in the grip of insecurity. The tall talks of democracy which is inherently institutionalised 'theocracy', has made them restless. The loss of opportunity boiling down to non-availability of jobs or business opportunity, and the unending victimisation that is the result of the creation of a class of 'young elite' with 'superior education' has cast a pall of 'inferiority complex' from which they cannot see any way out. I am of course talking of the majority of our youth, the

products of the Bangladesh education system.

Our Educated Elitist Minority

It was interesting to note during the debate that raged in the conference on the question of education — one participant going to the extreme of calling our educational system 'jattu' or rubbish! I could not have disagreed more with him, because I am a product of the Bangladesh education system. I don't think there is anything wrong with our education system i.e. everything is wrong with us. The point is how best should we be handling our education — keeping in consideration the fact that only a blend of academically and naturally gifted individuals will be calling the shots in the global world.

If we are to view education as something that will ensure us a cushy NGO, multinational, bank or corporate job, then that is a personal ambition. However, if one is using one's education and thinking of creating employment or entrepreneurship, our education should not be used as a weapon to discriminate.

A Case in Point

One participant (obviously overseas educated) complained of the failure of a number of applicants for a job in his office, going to the extent of stating that 'none could describe themselves in one paragraph'. Fine, what language were the applicants expected to describe themselves in? Obviously in English. Fine, would the (employer) young man be able to describe himself in one paragraph in written Bengali? What is so great about the job on offer, that the knowledge of the English language puts such a strong demand? How many English-speaking clients is the applicant likely to encounter as a result of his employment?

In a country where more than 90 per cent of the population do not understand the English language, our 'educated' should not be looking down on these 'poor creatures'. They ought to be training them to the best of their abilities and in so doing, our superior education will be well worth its while, and the enlightenment required, to spark the imagination will certainly come out of those we decide to employ. Training is part of the business culture and it becomes imperative that we take that bit of extra time to train our employees to our own advantage, and thereby create skilled staff, rather than hang

in our office, or print the names of our alma mater in our business cards!

To further elucidate the above, I wish to point to the training in an institution called the Bangladesh Army. The Army stresses that all its officers speak English, and no matter how poor they sound, they are repeatedly encouraged, corrected and polished, as an ongoing process. I have been impressed to see many of my classmates who could get away with only a smattering of English in college, now speaking the language fluently and unobtrusively as officers of the Bangladesh Army. Our Army is being called up again and again for United Nations peace keeping operations, and their efficiency and skills have made them the only Bangladesh institution in great demand in the rest of the English or non-English-speaking world. All these officers are products of the Bangladesh educational system and they have already entered the global world without great fanfare!

Before blaming our system, we have got to take time out to investigate the mechanics of how and why things go right and wrong in our educational institutions. For instance, why do students from our cadet colleges fare better in life, than those in lesser known institutes? How do students from Notre Dame College, Dhaka College etc. — all Bengali medium colleges — do better than others? Similarly, down at the school level, what is the secret of success for students from Bengalee medium schools like St. Joseph, St. Gregory, U-Lab, Shaheen or Adamjee College, among others, as opposed to other lesser known schools following the same curriculum?

Prood Product of a Cheap University

I had sympathy for a participant who attempted to speak about his failure to get a job in a renowned NGO, simply because he was competing with students from private universities and therefore his would-be employer thought of him as a 'lesser candidate'.

To amplify his feeling, I wish to state, that like him my parents spent less than \$20 in total as fee for my graduation from the Dhaka University, which I would imagine is the cheapest university anywhere in the world!

Conversely, how ably the graduates from our private Universities whose parents are spending upward of \$20000 per annum will perform in the days

ahead is questionable — but for now, they seem to have a clear unexplained advantage.

I will however be quick to point out, that there are definitely brilliant exceptions — but the entire purpose of these private universities, for now it seems, is to create exceptional cases out of abject mediocrity for the implicit purpose of padding out their resume. Conversely there are many students from the Dhaka University who pursue the same line of thinking i.e. their M. Phils and PhD's serving nothing more than the pursuit of rising in the increasingly difficult social ladder.

It is this 'culture of bidesh ferot', that is a prerogative of the affluent. What the rich or the children are aspiring for, is however not an American education, but an education in snobbery — a curriculum unfortunately not offered at the Dhaka University! On the other hand, some students of the Dhaka University, as Rizwan bin Farouq tried to explain, half accept the notion that the pursuit of knowledge ends after they have received their coveted degree.

The Importance of Bengali

English is of course the language of our elite, and one only has to drop a word or two in appropriate places to be considered 'shukhito'. If the language is to be misused for the reasons of discrimination we had better be careful as to its implication in the global village. While I don't deny the importance of the English language, we have also to start reexamining our priorities to our national language Bengali.

I will not launch into the lecture of our 'Bhasha Shaheed's' and that we are the 'only people in the world to shed our blood for our mother tongue', but request the young to raise specific questions and find out the mechanics as to how the Chinese, Japanese, French, German and so many other major players are managing to take on the world, WITHOUT sacrificing their language, identity or their culture? Can we not use our education to emulate those very same case references in Bangladesh?

Our fixation for anything foreign is almost a form of extremist fundamentalism — stemming from our overbearing colonial roots. Yet, the Bengali language, with the combined population of Bangladesh and West Bengal is, arguably, the seventh largest spoken language in the world! In the global village we should be expecting

more foreigners to speak Bengalee — and that is not an ultra-nationalist statement!

The Malaise of Corruption

I believe that too much of familiarity breeds contempt, and the only time in the conference, adrenaline flowed was when the issue of corruption came up. We had an architect friend who explained tongue in cheek that he can get any permission done from the DIT if his client is prepared to pay the appropriate fee — yet another working for a multinational, stating without a iota of regret that he coughed up Taka 20,000 recently to get a job done! Time is money, there is no law in Bangladesh — is among the many arguments upheld in support of patronising corruption by these 'unwilling victims'.

That we live in a corrupt society, that corruption is institutionalised are complaints that have filled pages after pages in newspaper articles. There is however none who consciously deny that this is a malaise that needs to be rectified — the sooner the better. The onus is therefore on the young to create an environment for this great task. We cannot forget that if we indulge in corruption in a bid to get our 'job done', we become accomplice to that very same crime. Two wrongs have never made one right. By this attitude of complicity, we forget that we make things all the more difficult for others as well as ourselves. The young man who paid Taka 20,000 this instance, cannot expect to pay less than what he already did, if he has to face the prospect of a repeat business! Greed knows no boundary.

So how are we to fight corruption?

There is no such thing as a good or bad law, but the habit of obeying the law is of course a good habit. The Bureau of Anti-Corruption might have failed, but has the law? Lawlessness exists in our society, because we have at some point of time decided that we will break the same 'if nothing else works'. Patience is a virtue of the foolish, so they say — but no matter how difficult it sounds, we have to keep exercising this so-called foolish-virtue. If we fail, we have only one option and that is to create an atmosphere in which anarchy thrives — not much different from what we have already inherited, and which is not a very comforting feeling, is it?

The media can be used forcefully to expose these criminals. In India the young have taken

on the responsibility to fight very dangerous environmental criminals such as poachers, dealers in furs etc., by exploiting the media to the full. They have surreptitiously recorded the activities of such criminals, also played decoy customers to video tape their modus operandi, gone to the police, demanded and have got actions, based on hard evidence that they readily have in hand. I am sure within our group we have brilliant lawyers who can find out innovative alternatives to enforce the law, rather than find excuses to co-opt with criminals for short term profits, with disastrous long term implications.

The Will to Effect Change

It all grinds down to whether we have the will to effect radical changes than simply mouthing them. If we sit bickering and complaining about our problems, we should not be talking of changes at all. If our young have to lead — I believe they have to lead with examples. Are we prepared to set the right example — to initiate the catalyst for the foreseeable change?

When I talked of anatomy during my presentation, and that three fingers are pointed right back at us — the importance I was trying to attach is in our belief system. We have got to believe that things will change, wrongs will be righted — I mean there is a limit to things going wrong! Twenty-six years, is a lot of wasted years, yet in reality it is not too many years, when we stop to pause and take stock, of the positive aspect of Bangladesh — and what Mahfuz Anam poignantly referred to — 'WE HAVE GOT US'!

State Power 2010?

I do not wish to see myself trapped by the Vision 2000 or Vision 2020, because these are exercises not all of which will have any bearing in a consistently changing scenario, especially when we are coping with our priorities. That politics has become unfashionable was clearly visible in the conference. This attitude does not indicate, however, that our young have decided to call themselves 'apolitical animals'. The legacy of violence and hypocrisy unleashed by our political establishment has left such a bad taste in our mouth that there was none in the conference willing to make a career in politics!

However, can we not lock-in our thoughts, to see if we can come up with something called alternative politics? How can we trust our political establishment which lives in a time warp of possibly the 1960s, and believe that the only innovative way to press for change is by the national institute of hostage taking: hartal, and or the language of the lathi and danda as

an option, when dialogue and civilised behaviour fail? On what parameter of public judgment can we expect our leaders to change? What are the evidence currently available to us, to confirm that they will change, simply because we have decided to change? NONE WHATSOEVER.

To expect this lot to change, is expecting a miracle. Sadly Bangladesh cannot afford miracles, as that is the prerogative of the superstitious — people that have faith in talisman, saints, gurus, medicine men and quacks, and NOT in a generation whose enduring power is a faith in themselves, and importantly the information age!

I propose an agenda for radical change in our socio-political environment by raising the demand for STATE POWER 2010: The raising of awareness and consciousness to a simple argument that, because our leaders and intellectuals have failed in their responsibility, the youth of Bangladesh therefore should be encouraged and propelled with incentives to capture state power by the year 2010. This is an achievable goal. With the talent we witness in our youth, the youngest being as young as the country itself — twenty-six years. By the year 2010 the youngest would have entered their thirty eight birthday — an acceptable age for leadership when we note that Bill Clinton's personal staff have an average age of thirty two. In Cuba, the average age of decision makers is twenty-seven!

Nothing short of this demand will compel our leadership to wake-up. Another twelve years or the proverbial Bengalee decade 'ek joog' is all we can afford to expect for any major improvement in mental-hygiene. This lot of self-seeking hypocrites, they should be told in no uncertain terms that they MUST step down, if they cannot deliver. Move over and make way for the young may not be too much of a harsh or unreasonable demand, when we are to take stock, that most of our existing leaders will have crossed the age of sixty-five by the year 2010, and while they would have set in, if it has not already, I am sure we can all sit down and draft a beautiful retirement plan for their 'contribution' to our doom in a bid to set them free of their 'onerous responsibility'.

Among the young group that got together in The Daily Star conference, I felt there was enough potential for this eventually, to be shaped and executed. We can make it a broader based demand, by getting other newspapers in the Bengalee language to debate and create alternative options. A dialogue could be initiated and clear proposals needs to be worked out to engage the young and come up with what I refer to as a National Thought Process — a thought process that has all the criteria of Bangladesh — and in making it, making it VERY BIG in the days ahead.

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Low attendance was the order of the day in most offices yesterday after the 3-day Eid break. This picture was taken inside the Bangladesh Secretariat. —Star photo

Eid celebrated in Ctg

CHITTAGONG, Feb 1: Holy Eid-ul-Fitr was celebrated in the city as elsewhere in the country Friday with due religious fervour and enthusiasm, reports BSS.

In the city, Eid congregations, under the auspices of Chittagong Central Eid Jamaat Committee, were held at as many as 75 venues.

roads were decorated with flags inscribed with 'Eid Mubarak' in Bangla and Arabic, while important public buildings were illuminated in the evening.

Special prayers were also offered in all Eid congregations seeking continued peace and progress of the nation as well as greater solidarity for the Muslim Ummah.

Ershad leaves for US

Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad left for Washington last night on a 12-day visit at the invitation of US senators and congressmen, a JP press release said, reports UNB.

During his visit, the JP chairman will join traditional breakfast prayer arranged by US senators and exchange views with them on mutual interest.

Zillur distributes warm clothes

LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Zillur Rahman distributed winter clothes among 200 families in the city's Syedabad slum area on Thursday, reports UNB. The winter clothes were donated by Dhaka WASA.

Faisal M Khan to attend Nat'l Breakfast Prayer in Washington



The US Congress has invited young entrepreneur and one of the directors of the Pacific Group, Faisal M Khan, to attend the National Breakfast Prayer at Washington DC commencing from tomorrow, says a press release.

Son of eminent industrialist and BNP lawmaker Manzur Morshed Khan, Faisal left for Washington yesterday. President Bill Clinton, First Lady Hillary Clinton and distinguished personalities from across the world are expected to attend the 46th Breakfast Prayer this year.

'Book Day' inaugurated

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad yesterday underscored the need for forming book clubs in every nook and corner of the country for spreading education and making the movement of reading books a success, reports BSS.

Inaugurating as the chief guest the programmes of 'Book Day,' organised by Bangladesh Book Club at Central Shaheed Minar in the city, the minister said worthy and competent persons could be created in every field of society provided the people could be made book-oriented.

Later, a rally, led by the minister, was brought out from the Shaheed Minar and terminated at the National Press Club after parading the city streets.

Obituary

A K M Anwarul Hoque Bhuiyan, retired Director, Manpower Training Bureau and Ex-principal, Mirpur Technical Training Centre, died of massive cardiac arrest on Saturday at Suhrawardy Hospital, in the city, says a press release.

His qukhwant will be held at his Uttara residence tomorrow after Asr prayers.

Begum Khadija Khatun, grand daughter-in-law of the founder of Azimpur Daira Sharif Hazrat Shah Sofi Syed Mohammad Dayer (RA) died at her Azimpur residence on Saturday. She was 97, reports UNB. Gukhwant of Begum Khadija will be held at her residence on Tuesday after Asr prayers.



Bangladesh Book Club brought out a rally from the Central Shaheed Minar in the city yesterday on the occasion of Book Day '98. —Star photo

Dainik Janata closed down

Bengali daily The Dainik Janata was closed down yesterday by its management, reports UNB.

A notice to this effect was issued by the authorities from the daily's office at Shantinagar saying it was not possible for them to continue the publication.

Shooting at PM's office condemned

Different organisations have condemned the incident of shooting at the room of Prime Minister's political advisor Dr S A Malek on January 28, reports BSS.

Mohila Muktiyoddha Sangad expressed concern over the incident and condemned it. Convener and member secretary of Muktiyuddha Chet-

ona Bastobayan O Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Jatiya Samannaya Committee, Syed Hassan Inam and Prof Abdul Mannan Chowdhury respectively in a statement condemned the incident.

In a statement, 215 teachers of different universities have expressed concern over the incident.