

Righting the Education Mess

Yesterday was Education Day. Perhaps only one newspaper remembered it. It has receded into such insignificance that nobody cares even to pay lip-service to it.

The Education Day on September 17 was observed religiously by the students for over two decades. And it stood for a stupendous cause and three young lives were sacrificed to champion it.

Of course, the oblivion started with the students themselves. The movement commemorated by the Education Day started as a part of a package that in 1962 shook the first military dictatorship of Pakistan.

And the students forgot in a year or two that they were the first party to policy decisions on education. If only students continued to be interested in education and its philosophy and content and structure, its organisation and financing — the complete mess that is education now in an independent country, wouldn't have been here.

Education is the most important aspect of our national, cultural and individual life. We are doing very badly in this. Let Education Day be an occasion to evaluate the situation, set it right and launch a big march forward.

Price Stability

The prices of daily essentials should now deflate back to pre-flood levels. Because the factors that put them in a spate are on their way out now. Flood waters are receding, communication links and supply arteries are coming back to life.

Much as the productive sectors of the economy, agricultural and industrial, have taken the brunt of the floods and our conventional shopping list awaits a trimming, we have definite counter-veiling reasons to expect that market prices should actually stabilise at affordable notches.

The steady flow of supplies and the stability and affordability of commodity prices will critically hinge on efficient and corruption-free operation of the relief distribution network and the normal marketing mechanism.

Birds Reign at ZIA

When some days back birds entered the engine of a Qatar bound aircraft forcing the pilot to bring the plane to a screeching halt leaving its tyres flat and more than 250 passengers in a state of utter panic.

Fortunately none of these accidents led to major casualties. But what confounds one is airport authorities' attitude. The recurrence of the mishaps clearly underlines their reluctance to learn from mistakes.

Is it not delinquency at its height? The irresponsibility shown by the bird shooters is enough to put one in the picture about the civil aviation laxity at ZIA.

THERE is a Chinese saying that we learn from each other. The other day, 15 September to be exact, I learnt from some young persons whose hopes in the deepest and most powerful sense lies in what is happening below.

As I listened to them, I recalled what play-wright President Venkay Navel wrote once, such hope is not the same 'as joy that things are going well, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good. It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength and courage to continually try new things even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do here and now.'

Yes, the situation that we face today as a nation, is indeed perilous and our groping is towards an uncertain future. The most striking signs of our times today are the listless ill-fed women, children and men drifting in swollen streams. No they are not as yet the 'ecological boat people', since they would like to hold on to the land, the hearth and home they had once and they still hope to rebuild and go back to. Yet they shattered lives continue to form the hard questions that confront the fumbling, and quite often in adequate pro-people rhetoric that we the elders in the capital city glibly spout forth.

The young persons/persons who reprimanded us said in no uncertain terms. 'Why worry about who gets together with whom at the mountain-top? Will they ever travel to the areas where not even the shrubs are left for our mothers and sisters to hide behind for sheer physical necessities and wait for the nightfall to cover their shame? Do you know that when we went to a marooned neighbourhood in a village, they said, 'we can still survive. Please go a little further to the next neighbourhood and embrace them, because they have nothing. Here is the very little that we can spare and our younger people will go with you as volunteers. But, please, give them some respect and clean drinking water. Can you help in recharging the hand tubewells that have just emerged from the dirty waters?'

Both suffer from girlish obstinacy. Both have almost the same level of knowledge of the statecraft, of the economy and of the international complexities around the country.

The only difference between the two is that while Sheikh Hasina is bought and sharp-tongued in her public dealings, Khaleda Zia in most cases is as cold as cucumber. This is the reason why the two worlds will never meet, no matter what the managers, labour leaders, scholars, teachers, students and shop owners yearn for. We are all suffering from an attitude problem.

This is the fundamental reason why your treaty for a modus vivendi among our two major political parties, even when the country faces the worst catastrophe in its 28 years of existence will inexorably fall on deaf ears. Economy will never take the centre stage of our politics until there is a sea change in the quality of our political leaders. As to when such change is likely to come, well, no matter what the managers, labour leaders, scholars, teachers, students and shop owners yearn for. We are all suffering from an attitude problem.

On the other, I was surprised to watch the government's attitude towards its counterpart.

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"The Quality of Mercy"

Sentiments are good enough to write a poem perhaps but not for rebuilding a devastated economy. Yes, that is true. Also true is the fear that the avarice of some, may make food availability out of reach for the little purchasing power, the majority people might have in lieu of whatever work is made available to them. But the poet again comes to the rescue.

There was no lack of social cohesion there, no motive for any recognition. Why worry about what happens in their own generation? Follow the people and we are confident we shall overcome.

I recalled what a sage-statesman said once, Mahatma that he is, his name is Mohandas Karmchand Gandhi. He said, 'There goes my people, I follow them because I am their leader.'

Am I being pastoral or romantic? My answer is 'no'. The essence of the matter, the economist friend, Alfar, said in that rather unstructured dialogue about social capital is exactly what the younger people in the audience saw themselves in people's own solidarity.

But is not that wonderful social capital enshrined in the ancient wisdom of the Holy Texts? The Quran proclaims, 'So give what is due to the kindred, the needy and the wayfarer. That is best for those who seek the countenance of God' (Rum: 38). His Holiness the Pope reminds the faithful, 'Let us not forget that, at the close of the day, we shall be called before the Lord to account for our action on behalf of our brothers.'

Lord Buddha says, 'He who eats alone cannot find happiness.' And Prophet Muhammad pronounced, 'He who goes to the bed with a full stomach knowing his neighbour is hungry, cannot be a real believer in me.'

(Reported in Al-Kabeer by Al-Tabrani). Jesus Christ says, 'So the last shall be the first and the first last.' And in the medieval Judaic tradition, Maimonides or Brother Moses presents the 'ladder of Tzedakah', a ranking of how to support the last and the least, by providing them the basic minimum for survival without any mindfulness of virtue or seeking the comfort of conscience as a reward. The highest level is to

provide them access to capital and know-how for feeding themselves.

The first task is yet to be completed, and the second task, God-willing, must be done together by the scientists, the professionals in the field, the financial institutions, both in the public and the private sector, and the younger generation, not as bestowers of superior wisdom but as humble partners in creating common wisdom.

All that nature's providence bestows upon mankind, the sun and the moon, wind and rain, aquifers, plants and animals, are not to be exploited indiscriminately nor decimated for

sheer avarice but gratefully celebrated and prudently conserved. Advancements in frontier knowledge and science must build upon local wisdom that has to be shared not as possession to be dispensed with at a proprietary cost to the ancestral inheritance of social practice by the farmers but as an entrustment, not as a prerogative for the holders of knowledge power, but as a gift to those who created the base for the currently banded about innovations. What is natural is never merely so. It is a trust with divine mercy for ensuring the right of each individual human being to food. Let us not forget that 'from food springs all life' and to food we return. (Geeta).

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This is a useless hassle and with long queues at each counter it is a double hassle.

Why does one have to pay the bills every month? Can't it be done every three or four months? That will save a lot of time, money and energy both of the bank employees and the public. Also all bills should be accepted by all banks, so that a person doesn't have to run to four different places for paying his four different bills.

Then there should be arrangement for bill payments on Saturdays too, so that working hours are not wasted on paying it. Bank employees will be too happy to work if given overtime payments. Also more than one counter should take the bills, and complete the procedure there and then. There should also be a separate counter for ladies, so that housewives can do this job easily and help out their husbands.

Dr Sabrina Q Rashid Dhaka, Cantonment, Dhaka.

I don't agree, Ms Priyanka

Sir, I read with interest a letter Mr. M Shabbir (DS 11.9.98) in which the writer expressed her very liberal views about ladies attire etc. I don't agree with all her views and would like to point out certain facts.

Men are by nature physically stronger than women. Nature has provided men with a hormone called Testosterone which makes them more aggressive, stronger, powerful and less intriguing than the females.

Clothes are basically worn for protection against wind, heat, moisture, rain, cold, sun and also prying eyes.

There are certain other mental disorders called exhibitionism and rape syndrome which are prevalent among some women and men.

So attire of ladies and girls are ought to be such so as not to reveal too much, not to provoke, not to tempt, but to protect and cover them decently.

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US President's future

Sir, US President Bill Clinton now appears to be in the soup, following the disclosure in the Kenneth Star's report about the president's escapades with the White House intern to the younger sections of the American people, the disclosures didn't seem to have caused much of a ripple as the approval rating for the president's policies continued to remain high, perhaps because the young generation there may have undergone changes in their outlook on social mores. In their eyes, the achievements of the man, hailed up for the reported moral lapses, counted for more.

But despite of this, it seems that there is a hard core of public opinion, as reflected through the more mature people of that country which may not take easily the reported moral lapses of the president, so whatever the final outcome of the tussle between the Congress and the

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sacred duty for a woman or a man than to feed the family and the kindreds. These can be no more sacred duty for communities or nation states than that of ensuring for every neighbour or citizen an adequate and whole some diet. There can be no more sacred duty for the international community than that of solidarity with justice so that the obscene scourge of hunger and poverty, when disaster strikes or otherwise, becomes a nightmare of the past.

The world 'poesis' according to its Greek origin means making and the maker is a poet. But 'the materials of the poet are not so much facts as symbols and narratives or rather facts that are themselves symbols and narratives.' Only the generosity of a poet, perhaps, can help us build resolve to make human deprivation and degradation a matter of the past.

"The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven. Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

It is an attribute to God Himself. And earthly power then show likest God's. When mercy seasons justice."

(William Shakespeare).

Only thus we can instill new breath into our shattered lives and chant together "Life again has reached us. Darkness has gone away, light is coming."

(Rig Veda).

So let us pray, "Bless that Mother nature be kind to us. The Heavens give us peace. The Earth be gentle. Gentle be the water that flows. Gentle be the plants and herbs that grow. May the past be kind. The future benign."

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