

"Now I am in KG 1!"

by A. Maher

English medium kindergarten education in Bangladesh has taken a predatory turn, targeting toddlers with an ever-increasing volley of textbooks, classwork and psychological demand. But will the newly emerging "More materials, more results" concept get more out of a six-year old?

THE five-year old is ecstatic. He has just got his report card, which has a colourful "certificate" attached to it with a "Promoted to KG 1" in blaring font. The parents too share his joy, but theirs is short-lived. Because after all the commotion has died down, they now have to confront the daunting experience of seeing their ward through the next six years — the stepping stones to getting past the primary education rigmarole in Bangladesh. For, this is the period that these children are battered with books, extra-curricular activities, teachers and ever-demanding schools in the process of getting educated.

At present, these institutions and their activities are a gawking topic of neglect and mismanagement — a notorious sector by itself. The exasperation starts with the books and stationary list for the coming year. Actually it's more like an appendix — the fine print magically expands when you get to the bookshop (or stationary shop).

Colour World! Nowadays, it seems the children of smaller classes, like Playgroup, Nursery and Kindergarten onwards are the targets of triggering a buying spree by hapless parents. Teachers have no hesitation in prescribing endless booklists and "educational materials" for these five to seven year olds, many of whom can hardly read.

"Educational materials" include (and are mostly) stationery like marker pens (of different colours) for writing on the whiteboard, two sets (of 12 each) of crayons for use with exercise books, an array of oil paints (complete with brushes — thin and medium) and, in some schools, a separate set of coloured chalks for the blackboard. And that's only one student's pack.

With some 20 to 25 children per class and a little multiplication, we have, on any typical school day, a total of something around 725 assorted colour

pens/pencils in the classroom! Worse still: many parents complain that many of these mysteriously go "missing" after several days — replacement is the only solution!

One Stop, One Price

Buying the listed items can be another headache. There is only one shop, with one branch in one area of (one!) Dhaka (in some extreme cases there also has to be one specific shopkeeper!). This has become a customary practice in school-bookshop dealings (in Dhaka, most bookshops cater to stationary needs as well). Not only do guardians have to put up with the acute pricing system of the particular monopoly, they are not at liberty to choose equivalent texts from different sources.

That brings us to books.

These have contracted the stationary syndrome. One book, one edition, one publisher (and more importantly, one price). Many of the books are published in developed countries (like the U.K., U.S.A. or Canada) making them more dear than their lower-priced equivalents. But then, as the school authorities and shopkeepers alike would inform sometimes, there are no equivalent texts or cheaper editions from countries like India or Bangladesh.

Exorbitant Fees

The elevated fee structure in English medium kindergartens (and higher classes for that matter) has long been a subject of inconclusive debate — to such an extent that we have come to accept it. Pupils can be charged as much as 800-1000 taka per month in KG 1 in schools in Dhaka. Plus there are the additional "hidden charges" that have to be satisfied every year. A school in Mohammadpur in Dhaka charged 4000 taka as "yearly" charge for a student who just got promoted to KG 1 from Nursery! When approached in a similar situation, another school in Dhanmandi admitted they took these "charges" every year to "confirm" the child's seat in the

class. If this fee was not met, the student would "have his/her name removed from the register."

This is something like getting admitted every year into the school for a new class! Records of monetary transactions are also shady in some cases. Specific "categories of payment" are deliberately left out of the pay book — some examples are Late Fee, Clubs Fund (for the different clubs in the school), Library Fee and Lab Fee. Of the last two, the library and laboratory facilities are promised long before any definite service is provided.

What's for Homework?

After Nursery, it's all work and no play. Loads of homework, hairline marking schemes and even submission deadlines! Gotta grow up fast! Today's Super Toddlers are home-working overtime. Average tasks include three to four pages of numbers (writing one's, two's, etc.) eight alphabets (two times each) and a poem. Deadline: on Tuesday, provided to you is Sunday! A visit to Anika's (a Nursery graduate doing her KG's) house in the afternoon found her hunched over a book trying to cram some lines of "Little Miss Muffet..." into her head. She had come home from school at twelve o'clock and had to finish this poem so she could study for tomorrow's "exam" in the evening.

This becomes a routine despite schools claiming less or no homework at all. The child just has enough time for a little recreation and even this has to be adjusted to her "schedule".

How Much is Really Being Taught?

Does this cocktail of texts, homework, money and teachers enlighten the child to a satisfactory level of intellect at the end of the year? Some teachers argue that learning through variety helps a child to communicate better and respond to inputs more easily. Others stress they are following foreign curricula and techniques — just how

much of this resembles our own education system here remains to be debated. Parents meekly point out that even though their wards are wearied with school at such an early level they have very limited options to quality primary education — they can only go with the crowd.

Conscious parents think that the training of teachers from classes IV and below (especially Nursery and KG) should be brought under scrutiny. "Teacher awareness" could become tutelage jargon in the future of our national education policy. In various developed countries, people handling infants are given lessons on psychology and child behaviour. Emphasising on such issues in primary education can naturally be shunned by poorer, partisan governments in LDC's. But if taboos are anything to go by, they are best forsaken for national progress.

And Finally...

Here the term English-medium has become synonymous with private funding and a deceptive scenario of glitzy quality education. It is high time the government intervened, to put on track a sphere of our national interest which has been badly disregarded since independence. How can standards improve if they are not actualised at the primary level? An autonomous monitoring body sponsored by the Government should be created for overlooking the development and progress of English medium institutions. Surprise on-site inspections are still a long way off; countering certain "influences" on behalf of the owners is an issue to tackle.

Questions pop up every time we notice hesitant Education Ministry officials keeping mum on an "English-medium" problem. If this sector is given substantial priority like Bengali-medium schools, then the two "mediums" could bolster the present education system to be at par with international standards.

Baghdad, Beyond the News of the Day

by Khalid Baig

THERE is more to the story of Baghdad than one can get from the news of the day.

Time was when it was the most advanced city in the world. In science and technology, commerce and manufacturing, intellectual pursuits and dissemination of knowledge, arts and literature, its achievements were unparalleled in east or west. The catastrophe that made all of that a distant memory was equally unprecedented in the history of mankind.

It started in 1218 AD. The savage armies of Chengiz Khan invaded and destroyed most of Central Asia and Persia — razing to ground such great cities as Bukhara, Samarkand, Herat, Nishapur, and Balkh. He did not attack Baghdad, but paved the way for that invasion by his grandson, Halaku (Hulagu) Khan. In 1258, Halaku sacked Baghdad, killing 1.6 million people in the city and ending forever the signs of glory of the great city. It was a complete scorched earth policy. They came, they burned, they killed, they left. The Mongols, as the whole world knows, were savage people. Barbarians.

In the 1990s, the land and its people were attacked again. They attacked hospitals and pharmacies, water reservoirs and food warehouses, factories and power stations, schools and bazaars. They also imposed a blockade on the country that denied food to the hungry and medicine to the sick. They sentenced everyone in the country to die a slow painful death. Beyond the widespread death (of the innocent men, women and children) and destruction wrought by the invaders that came eight centuries apart,

there are other similarities between the two. Chengiz Khan was provoked by a terrible folly of Khwarizm Shah, who had killed 400 Mongol traders on suspicion that they were spies. The invaders in 1991 were also "provoked", although they used an engineered provocation. Halaku had heard that it would be bad if the Muslim Khalifa's blood fell on the ground. So he did not kill him with his sword. Rather, the Khalifa was thrown in a sack and clubbed to death, then trampled by the horses. The invaders in 1998 had heard it would be bad to attack during the holy month of Ramadan. So, they started the carnage three days before it. A Halakuish display of sensitivity!

But Halaku only had weapons of mass destruction. The invaders in the 1990s not only had the most advanced weapons of mass destruction, they also had the weapons of mass distraction — the most advanced propaganda machinery ever developed, in the form of the CNN, the BBC, the Reuters, and other media giants. Halaku lacked it. That is why Halaku never sang "Peace on earth", while carrying out the massacres. He made no pretensions that he was doing it to uphold "international law." He did not make any pronouncements that he had "no quarrel with the people", while putting them to the sword. He did not announce his "respect for Islam" while burning mosques and schools. He was a barbarian!

Chengiz and Halaku Khan still rule the world. Their logic and principles are still driving real-politik. The scene is repeated endlessly in Bosnia and Kosovo, Kashmir and Palestine.

Iraq and Beirut, Afghanistan and Sudan. But in their latest reincarnation they look so civilized and benign. It is amazing what the make-up artists and spin-doctors of world's finest propaganda machine can do. It looks pretty, but is no less deadly. This is the unvarnished truth about the world we live in today.

Was the Mongol invasion just an accident that happened because of a blunder by Khwarizm Shah? While a superficial reading of history may make one think that it was, reality is entirely different. Forces of evil have always been present in this world and will remain so, but they become dominant only when the forces of good become weak due to internal problems. We can see the big problems in the Muslim world of that time that were the real cause of the tragedy that followed. First was the infighting. Khwarizm Shah had spent most of his time and energies fighting with the Ghauris and other Muslim rulers in neighboring territories. The sons of the great Sultan Salahuuddin fought among themselves. The governors of Makkah and Madinah were engaged in a battle between them. Alqami, the vizier of Mustasim, the last Abbasid Khalifa, who was killed by Halaku, had conspired against the Khalifa.

Then there was this love of money and the worldly pleasures. Everyone was busy raising his standard of living. Corruption was common. People were given to music and entertainment; pomp and show, conspicuous consumption, and vain pursuits. Khalifa Mustasim himself was more interested in hunting and enter-

tainment than the affairs of the state. There is a telling report about Badruddin Lulu, the ruler of Mosul, who once received two requests. Khalifa Muta'sim had asked him to send musical instruments and singers. Halaku Khan asked for cannons and other weapons used for demolishing castles. And while all this was going on, some religious leaders were discussing who was superior: All Radi-Allahu unhu or Muawwiya Radi-Allahu unhu.

After taking Baghdad, Halaku marched toward Syria and Africa. Everyone who came in his way was routed. He seemed so invincible. But in 1260 CE at Ain-Jalut, in Galilee, the forces of Sultan Baibars handed him a terrible defeat. The inspiring force behind the Sultan was Sheikh Izzuddin, a great scholar and reformer who urged the Sultan to move on and turn back the Mongol tide, and who himself participated in the jihad. His inspiring sermons brought the Muslims back to Islam by the thousands. When a people turn to Allah, Allah's help turns to them. Within two years all of Syria had been liberated from the Mongols. What is more, due to the great work of dawa carried out by the great scholars of that time, within forty years of Halaku's invasion of Baghdad, his descendants had accepted Islam.

Today the moral and political picture of most parts of the Muslim world does not look much different from the one at the Baghdad of 1250s. Our tragedy is the same. The way out of the tragedy is also the same. If only we would reflect.

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Views from US

America the Merciless

by Edward S Herman

ALTHOUGH Americans are mainly decent people, their country is merciless. This contradiction comes about because the country is run by a small economic and political elite that uses its dominant economic and military power to serve its own interests, and people who stand in its way must be crushed. Ordinary Americans might not like spending huge sums to crush distant peoples if they had an unbiased representation of all the facts. But they don't get those facts, and their consent is carefully engineered. This is done by dehumanizing and demonizing the targeted enemies and making their destruction into a morality play, a struggle between good and evil. It also requires a careful selection and suppression of facts.

Dehumanization and demonization have had a long history in this country. Dispossessing and slaughtering the native Americans required that they be deemed savages, and the slave system also rested on a treatment of blacks as less than human. The subjugation of the Philippines at the turn of the century, which involved ruthless treatment and mass killing of the native popula-

tion, was greatly helped by our sense of superiority and the strange morality of a Christianizing mission that destroyed in order to "save." This same racist morality allowed us to impose our rule and that of chosen tyrants like Duvalier, Somoza and Trujillo on the peoples of Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic.

Countries that have crossed us have paid dearly. Following the Vietnam war, in which we killed vast numbers and left a smashed country, we maintained an 18-year boycott that helped bring that traumatized country from recovering. Similarly, Cuba under Fidel Castro and Nicaragua under the Sandinista government in the 1980s were subjected to severe boycotts (as well as terrorist attacks) that caused great suffering to the peoples of those countries. In each of these cases, our actions were presented to the American people as a just struggle against a nefarious Communist enemy. Our own material interests in maintaining a global open door economy, and the human costs of our policies, were barely acknowledged.

Our attacks and pursuit of sanctions on Iraq have been based on the demonization of Saddam Hussein as "another Hitler" who cannot be allowed to develop "weapons of mass destruction." We are also allegedly carrying out UN policies that represent the will of the "international community." But during the 1980s both the Reagan and Bush administrations and Mrs. Thatcher's government gave Saddam Hussein loans and approved his acquisition of "weapons of mass destruction" even in the face of his aggression against Iran and his use of chemical weapons against both Iran and Kurds within Iraq. In short, he was supported when he served US aims, and became a bad man only when he crossed us.

Although the US position is that we are carrying out UN policies, the fact is that only the United States and Britain support the rigorous sanctions and periodic bombing of Iraq, and the policies go forward essentially because of US power. Furthermore, the United States regularly violates the UN-granted authority and the UN Charter itself. The United States now openly admits that it will press sanctions until Saddam Hussein is ousted, although the UN grant of sanctions authority has never made

Saddam's removal a condition for the lifting of sanctions. It is also clear that the United States is using inspections to humiliate Saddam Hussein, to provoke him into acts that will justify using violence against him.

The sanctions policy has been very costly to the people of Iraq; as in the case of post-war Vietnam, we have not allowed Iraq to recover from the devastation of the 1991 war, and by credible estimates some 5,000 to 6,000 children are dying every month as a result of the sanctions. We contend that this is all Saddam's fault. But his people did not starve before the Gulf War and our responsibility for the present catastrophe is heavy. In a sense, the United States has been holding the 18 million Iraqis hostage till Saddam Hussein goes and other US ends are met. This is arguably a form of terrorism that makes the 1979 Iranian seizure of 53 Americans as hostages look very modest indeed.

Courtesy: Scanner
The writer is an economist and media analyst. His most recent books are *Triumph of the Market* (1996) and *The Global Media* (with Robert McChesney, 1997).

India Gets the Giggles in Quest for Good Health

Sarat Chandra Das writes from Delhi

EVERY afternoon, a continuous ripple of laughter rises like an orchestral crescendo through the glass windows of one of Delhi's largest hospitals.

The pitch of the laughter varies like jazz music on a free scene. A curious crowd gathers below in the under-nurtured garden. One new visitor believes the burst of laughter comes from a hideous asylum, where the mentally ill are going through electroshock therapy. The reality is as far removed from that image as it could be. Perched on a rectangular carpet in a hospital hallway, a group of people cross their legs and raise their arms, looking almost as if they are at prayer. Through control of their breathing, they slowly suck their energy up to the top of their spines. Storms seem to gather on their faces, and eventually they open their mouth and let go. This is how they learn to laugh.

The man behind this show is Dr S C Sethi, a middle-aged pediatrician. He is inspired by Norman Cousins' book *Anatomy of Illness*, which says the absence of laughter and of vitamin C are the two primary causes of illness.

I picked laughter because it is easy on the system," said Sethi. "I practised all by myself before encouraging the crowd to

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laughter." Sethi arranges a daily gathering in the hospital from 3 to 4 pm, an unofficial club whose participants are mainly hospital employees. Laughing is part of their yoga curriculum.

"Initially it was not easy as people felt they were not up on a show, but when it became a regular exercise they were completely at ease," Sethi said.

In Delhi's public parks, people gather to laugh every morning and evening. Janakpuri, a residential pocket of west Delhi, regularly hosts an early morning laughing gathering. Participants come from all walks of life — doctors, government officials, school teachers, even security officers who have been taught to stiffen their face like granite for their job and find it difficult to relax and laugh.

"It's hard to believe that people who look morose the previous afternoon laugh so heartily and for so long," says J Kumar Arora, a retired senior civil servant and participant in the laugh-in.

Laughing is already a mass movement in many cities of western India. It may have originated in the Lokhandwala Park in Mumbai's Andheri suburb, where Dr Madan Kataria, a local physician, began a course

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of laughter with a handful of people. The movement then crossed the Creek to tickle the sides of smaller and more sedate cities like Pune, Nashik, Ahmednagar, Indore, Baroda and Ahmedabad.

"They were hesitant and shy about laughing in the open, but gradually they picked up the chorus," Kataria said.

Kataria said they initially believed no one other than a circus clown could make them laugh. He kept his sessions going with a stock of jokes heavily borrowed from the *Reader's Digest*. "Initially, I had to try hard to make people laugh but now no more, since people have realised the physical benefits of laughter."

Today they laugh almost at everything, wisecracks or shaggy dog stories, irreverent anecdotes and anti-climatic punchlines.

Today there are more than a dozen laughing clubs around Mumbai, with more than 3,000 participants. The membership is free. The clubs observe a somewhat strict protocol: men and women stand in parallel rows, like a co-educational school during morning prayers. The tutor stands solemnly in front of the crowd before he keys them up to laugh. The laughter takes its course

through routine breaks for jokes and temporary letups when the participants feel the laughing is becoming too heavy on their stomachs.

"That is only a small cost you pay to ease out your stress," says Kataria.

The Indian Yoga Institute, with 450 centres across the country, is responsible for bringing laughter into the hospital and elsewhere. It circulates literature that says laughing helps the abdominal muscles flex and contract, giving a mild massage. "As you laugh, you inhale and exhale more deeply," says its brochure. "More oxygen, the vital force of existence, enters the body and toxins automatically get thrown out."

When the brain is at peace, it produces alpha waves at between seven and 13 cycles per second, which — according to Aditya Kataria, a physician who enrolled in his namesake's laughing club at Lokhandwala, releases endorphins, the "feel-good hormones."

"These hormones lift up the spirits with optimism," he said. "When a person laughs, these hormones are released in plenty, thus making a person feel happy."

The writer is an Indian freelance journalist resident in Delhi.

New Year Comes Amidst Joy and Disappointment

by Hemant Babu

The dense fog in the capital coupled with the recent spate of robberies and murders did nothing to make life easier for Delhi police on New Year's eve.

THE New Year was welcomed with much fanfare, loud music and late-night parties across the country while the pious prayed for a happier year than the one gone by. But in Mumbai, the revelry had more than a touch of disappointment thanks to the refusal of dancing girls to turn up for work at the city's bars. The lights, decorations and the liquor were all there. But many of the bars' patrons returned disappointed because the ubiquitous dancing girls were missing. Thousands of girls who dance to Hindi film songs in these bars struck work on December 24 to demand a larger share in tips given by customers. Bar owners tried their best to resolve the crisis, but succeeded in convincing only a few of the girls to return to work for New Year's eve.

There are about 3,500 bars that have girls in sequined outfits and heavy make-up performing on small dance floors.

The girls bring in more revenue than the food and drinks sold for, but end up getting less than half the money they help raise. About Rs. 3.5 million (\$83,000) changes hands in Mumbai's bars every night. According to Manjeet Singh, president of the Bar Owners' Association, the strike was off and many girls had started reporting back to work since the night of December 30.

"This is not enough, the girls will not accept anything less than 70 per cent. Let them keep 30 per cent," said Dolly Thakur, a 32-year-old representative of the dancing girls who herself performed for many years in several Mumbai bars. The strike was not called off, she insisted. "The strike is on," said Anand Shetty, president of the Maharashtra Hotel and Restaurant Ladies' Union. "They will not budge this time unless bar owners give them their due." About 20,000 dancing girls

in Mumbai live entirely off the largesse of customers as they are not paid salaries. Customers cash currency notes and dancing girls come up to collect them. Though the dancers doused the fervour of some, others with whole families still made merry at various places. While in Mumbai, the hot spots were the Gateway of India and sundry other beaches which people thronged in thousands, in Delhi the hub of celebration was Connaught Place.

Crowds entertained children during the day at Connaught Place, but as the evening progressed, its corridors were taken over by people congregating at restaurants and bars. Liquor flowed freely at private parties organised by the city's glitterati as people party-hopped late into the chilly and foggy night. Despite the cold, people congregated at the vast India Gate lawns swinging to drum beats and bursting crackers. Police armed with

breathalysers were alert in all the metros ready to check drivers in the drunken revelers. While restaurants, bars, discotheques and pubs in Mumbai were allowed to remain open and play music till 2 A.M., people were forbidden from driving cars with blaring music after 11.30 P.M.

The dense fog in the capital coupled with the recent spate of robberies and murders did nothing to make life easier for Delhi police on New Year's eve. In the eastern metropolis, Calcutta, the swarmed Park Street where restaurants had everything from poetry recitations to belly dancing on offer. People who chose to remain indoors heralded the New Year over a home-cooked dinner and programmes on television. In the southern city of Chennai, special midnight prayers were held at temples and churches as in other places in Tamil Nadu.

— India Abroad News Service

Life Begins at 50!

Howard Campbell writes from Kingstone

Larry Alexander's urge to record again came after years of being on the road as either Hyman's manager or his brother's road manager. Apart from spending two years living in Jamaica in the late 1980s writing jingles, his career in music has been spent mostly behind the scenes.

IT is never easy for an entertainer to follow in the footsteps of a famous sibling, something singer Larry Alexander knows only too well as he prepares to start his solo career at the age of 50.

The younger brother of famous jazz pianist Monty Alexander, and the former husband of a famous American singer, the Swiss based Larry was in Jamaica recently shopping his debut album, "I Am Who Sings" to prospective distributors.

"People always associate me with Monty and Phyllis, but that wasn't really a problem to me. I know how show business works," said Alexander.

"Phyllis is Phyllis Hyman, the jazz/rhythm and blues singer Alexander was married to for eight years. A gifted vocalist who never made it big, Hyman committed suicide in 1995. Before her death there were indications that she was frustrated at not being able to break through in the American pop market.

Like Hyman whom he managed for 10 years and his more acclaimed sibling, Alexander has a bias to jazz which is the tone of "I Am Who Sings", which was recently released in Switzerland on his Swiss-based Presidency label.

"I Am Who Sings" is the younger Alexander's second album. It is the first full-length project from him since 1979s "Reggae Rock and Roll". Unlike that set which showcased a blend of pop and Latin sounds, Alexander's 1998 album is a delightful jazz number aimed at both the purist and lovers of the music in contemporary form.

"I sing like how my brother plays, he takes jazz music and drops some reggae in it, take a swing tune and drop some soca in it," said the jocular Alexander who has lived in Switzerland for the past three years. "This is what I have done with the compositions on this album."

The lanky Alexander gets a little help from his brother on an album that has several moments. Staying true to his straight ahead roots he experiments with hip hop and reggae without sounding contemporary which is "I Am who Sings" greatest asset.

"It's not a traditional Tony Bennett Trio, nothing like that," Alexander related, "it's got everything, reggae, swing, calypso..."

Indeed, "I Am Who Sings" strongest moments come when Alexander flirts with other flavours. The opening cut is a

cover of Marley's "Is This Love", a six-minute gem featuring a masterful solo by Monty that even Marley would have approved of.

You've Gone And Done" the rockabilly twang of "Wanted By This Wholehearted Man" and the islandic "Jamaica Nights" (written with Marjorie Whylie) are other numbers that make "I Am Who Sings" a must-have for the music lover with an eclectic ear.

Co-produced by Alexander Yanick Ebinger of Switzerland, the album took seven months to complete and is the first project for Presidency, a label Alexander started recently. It was recorded solely in Switzerland with input from some of that country's leading jazz players.

Larry Alexander's urge to record again came after years of being on the road as either Hyman's manager or his brother's road manager. Apart from spending two years living in Jamaica in the late 1980s writing jingles, his career in music has been spent mostly behind the scenes.

Like Monty, he was entranced by the cream of Jamaica's musicians who passed through their parents' Kingston home in the 1950s. "All of them seemed to play the piano," said

Alexander. "There was always music in the house." But while Monty's talent was rewarded with gigs alongside jazz top brass including Duke Ellington and Frank Sinatra after the family migrated to the United States in 1961, Larry's life took a different path.

He enlisted in the United States Air Force and fought for a year in the Vietnam War. Back in the US he made his living on the road either as the man who guided Hyman's career from lounge singer to one of international respect.

Interestingly, it was while serving in the role of Monty's manager during a tour of Switzerland that he decided to settle in Zurich. "This man who owned a studio, he liked my songs, I liked the country and I decided to stay," Larry reminisced.

While his career in the music business has been limited to the shadows, he hopes all that will change with the release of "I Am Who Sings".

"I made this CD because it was my mother's last wish before she died," he said. "I prayed that it would happen, but I couldn't find the way, the only thing I want is it to be given a chance."

