

Dhaka, Saturday, January 23, 1999

Confusion, Once Again

Confusion once again centered round the sighting of Shawal moon. The announcement over Radio and TV heralding Eid-ul Fitr came late as a vast majority of people were preparing for another day of fasting and in many mosques the jamaat for Tarab was held as usual. Those who relaxed for the Eid on Wednesday were suddenly caught on the wrong foot and sprinted for last minute shopping paying penalties for their naivety to the guiles of greedy shopowners. Due to the last minute announcement of Eid the traditional Eid Mubarak could not be offered to our dear readers, patrons and well-wishers. We extend, though late, a warm Eid greetings to you all. Even in this age of extraordinary scientific developments, the sighting of moon and calculations of the lunar months remain as primitive as ever. We would like to appeal to the government, Islamic Foundation and other related organisations and wise people to sit together to find out a more scientific, realistic and acceptable solution to this perennial problem.

At the end of the month-long Siaam, the people of Bangladesh are faced with the horrendous prospect of political acrimony between the opposition combine and the government. This is the Eid gift the politicians are offering to the people. The citizens of the country are already scared about the prospect of an uncertain future after the Eid holidays. As the opposition parties are sharpening their preparations to attack the government, the latter, on its part, is also preparing to reply 'befittingly'. The net result will be the loss to the economy. A sense of uncertainty and lack of confidence among the ordinary law abiding citizens has set in. The postures the politicians have taken against each other and the degrading vocabulary they have been using to defame each other, all testify to the disturbing, even turbulent, times ahead after the festival. It seems that no amount of Siaam, sacrifice and discipline of the holy month of Ramadan have had any sobering effect on the psyche of our politicians. We have had enough of their tirades in the name of the people's right to vote and food. We have had enough of their rhetorics in the name of the citizens. All these have turned out to be lies or half-truths. For God's sake, get hold on yourselves, try to realise the predicament of the ordinary law-abiding, taxpaying citizens and behave like caring human beings with love and compassion for your fellow beings.

We pray to the Almighty for an Eid gift — the sanity of our politicians.

Combating Lead

The effects of lead poisoning in humans, particularly children, have been known for decades. Substances which cause lead to pollute the environment including soil and water, are also not unknown to health establishments around the world. Yet, lead poisoning remains one of the most serious health hazards in urban areas of most countries. Against this backdrop, a forthcoming conference on "Lead Poisoning Prevention and Treatment" scheduled to be held Feb 8 next in the south Indian city of Bangalore, has come as a welcome signal that the world may be finally waking up to the dangers posed by this invisible menace. The conference, sponsored by the World Bank and three US non-governmental organisations, expects to bring 300 experts, government officials and civil society representatives together to address this critical issue.

For Bangladesh, the importance of the conference can hardly be over-estimated. In recent days, the effects of lead poisoning on children as well as adults have been dramatically exposed in reports released by experts. Exposure to lead can cause a range of health problems. These include high blood pressure, anaemia, loss of energy, infertility, kidney diseases, hypertension etc. Exposure to high levels of lead can cause coma, convulsions, and even death. Doctors fear that there may be no permissible limit of exposure to lead. This means that lead poisoning has to be either prevented through eliminating sources of lead pollution or by putting in place treatment facilities. It is expected that the conference, which has the backing of the World Health Organisation, will lead to concrete plan of action to address this issue in the developing world.

For Bangladesh, there is no scope to take the conference lightly. The population of all major urban centres, particularly Dhaka, is already severely affected by lead poisoning, especially due to the leaded variety of fuel used by motor vehicles. Being a major victim of lead pollution, Bangladesh needs to take a pioneering role at the conference and press hard for global efforts to address this issue. For the results of the conference to have real, lasting impact on Bangladesh policy and actions, the government machinery needs to build a close working relationship with others working in the field.

Welcome End to DoE Slumber

The Department of Environment's (DoE) plea to all city services organisations to not provide any new connection to buildings that do not have environmental clearance certificate suggests that the department has finally come out of its deep slumber. We hope that the DoE call will initiate an orchestrated move towards enforcement of Environment Conservation Act 1995 and Environment Conservation Rules 1997.

We believe that the show-cause notice served to Basundhara, a leading real estate developer, will send a strong warning for other housing firms that have so far made light, if not mockery, of the environment-related law of the land. The department's long-drawn indifference towards formulation and enforcement of environment-related laws is indeed solely responsible for the fact that none of the city buildings has ever obtained clearance certificate in this regard. We expect them to immediately figure out ways to mitigate the negative impact the extant, approved and under-construction buildings may have on environment.

The DoE initiative calls for sustained monitoring which, according to one top official, seems highly unlikely for the department with its limited resources. As a compromise they have decided to monitor only the firms involved in construction of multi-storyed buildings. It will certainly leave a big hole in the whole system. It is about time the government realised that environment protection should top its agenda and more efforts should be directed towards this end. We may have wasted plenty of time in slumber. We have no time for long-term plans, we need immediate action.

University Governance under Attack!

Let university administration come to closer scrutiny by the parliament so that revisions could be injected if and when needed. Bangladesh universities need to be relatively more outward looking than they happened to be so far.

THE administration of universities, at least in our part of the world, has long been subject to severe criticisms. We are accused of grooming a style of governance that hardly goes to cater to the needs of modern-day university education. Back home, I have also to bear some of the brunt of the arguments against our university administration since — fortunately or unfortunately — I happen to be a part and parcel of my university administration. But travelling to Europe, I am surprised to see that allegations against universities for their dismal performance also know no bounds.

In an article published recently a member of the European Parliament — Mr. Linder — takes a closer and albeit critical look at the factors that contribute to the growing failures of the European universities vis-a-vis American universities. (Herald Tribune, 15 January 1999). According to the author, the most dangerous weakness of Europe lies in its ailing universities and their dwindling competitiveness. Compared to what is available in this part of the globe, the US has the world's leading industries — from high tech to fast food and from Wall Street to Hollywood — as well as some of the best colleges of learning e.g. Harvard, Stanford, Chicago. "If you know the names of Sorbonne, Heidelberg and Bologna," says Linder, "it is because you are a cultivated person" And in the search for the reasons as to why majority of the Nobel Laureates come from the US, Linder lands with more than one reason. But he ranks the system of governance as the prominent one.

As I glance through his arguments, I find some similarities in the realm of university governance between Bangladesh and Europe. Quite akin to our system (and in sharp contrast to that of the US), Euro Universities are parts of a monolithic, government-run national system. Allegedly, these institutions suffer from a lack of clear-cut intents and initiatives to do better, to grow competitive and to derive the best out of tax payers' penny. On the contrary, because of the diversities in governance, the private and non-profit American universities tend to enjoy more freedom and are engaged in competition and takes tax-payers' pains seriously.

In Bangladesh, the chief executive of the university is called Vice-Chancellor (VC) Here in Europe, he/she is called a Rector. Rectors in European universities are not appointed (or dismissed) by the university board but typically are chosen through politicized process in which colleagues, students and non-academic staff vote on a nominating list from which the government makes its choice.... To be a Rector requires an accommodating spirit rather than entrepreneurial ability". In Bangladesh also, barring very few exceptions, you probably need more ballots than merits for a becoming VC. The entrepreneurial sagacity, allegedly, is submerged by the supremacy of the ballots.

But then some subtle differences between Bangladesh and Europe are in sight. In Europe, for example, university boards are usually made up of political appointments, curricula are decided by the parliament. The rector and board are not free to establish new departments, professors are not created by university board but by the ministry of education. The system for making faculty appointments are heavily regulated. Faculty salaries are determined through government

decrees and longevity matters more than merits... Academic freedom does involve freedom of thought but not freedom to take action." Not at all happy with what is happening in the name of university governance, the critics of the system seem to argue that "in this kind of environment, new ideas are not rewarded. There is need to persuade not just the rather impotent board, but also professors who are as keen on privilege as any other trade union member. If the great industrial corporations were to appoint their chief executives the way European universities do, they would all soon be out-competitive and have to close down. European universities are surely being out-competitive but they do not go bankrupt. The public coffers are still open and students do not have much choice". Admittedly, Bangladeshi universities enjoy relatively more freedom in the area of various selections, curricula development and financial matters than those of European universities.

Tony Blair's proposal to introduce tuition fees in universities is considered by some quarters as discrimination against the poor. "Complacent professors and political ideologues may declare that universities are different — that they cannot be looked upon as vulgar business". Accepting the argument as true, Linder asks universities to raise standard and be competitive so that they can beat American universities.

There are arguments on both sides of the aisle: elected vs. selected executive for the universities. Our experiences tend to show that universities where selected VCs are posted, are performing no better (even worse) than those with elected VCs at the helm of university affairs.

Beneath the Surface
by Abdul Bayes



The criticisms then should hover around as to whether there should be "too

much democracy" as prevailing now in the cam-

pus as opposed to "too little or no democracy" on the other side of the fence. Our founding fathers presented to us 1973 Act with the basic assumption that we would not make misuse of the rights and obligations enshrined in the Act and thus create an academic environment that breeds democratic norms and along with that a productive education system. But unfortunately, we do not seem to have lived up to the expectations of our founding fathers. We are frequently blamed for lowering our academic standards, involving too much in group politics and using our students as "stooges" to grab power. This kind of specific allegations are not generally found in the cases of European universities. However, after 26 years of its existence, an evaluation of the system is, probably, overdue to see whether the Act helped us to grow competitive and contribute to the socio-economic and technological uplift of the society for which three million people laid their lives in 1971.

Universities are breeding grounds of future leadership of a nation. If that ground fails to grasp the changing needs of the society within which it has to perform and of the globe of which it is a part, we are doomed to fail in ensuring a better society that the founding fathers of the Act dreamt of. Let university administration come to closer scrutiny by the parliament so that revisions could be injected if and when needed. Bangladeshi universities need to be relatively more outward looking than they happened to be so far. Let us step into the next millennium with a newer vision for the universities.

OPINION

Tarnished Image or Increased Transparency?

Monirul I Khan

Reading the opinion of Dr Sabrina Q Rashid (17.1.99) on the recent sexual harassment of a female student by a male teacher at Dhaka University I was seriously trying to dig deep into the problem and as a sociologist trying to link it up with the greater fabric of society. There was one obvious reason for doing so — I also teach in the same university. Not denying that one has to take note of such act(s) with requisite concern. There are at least two dimensions for serious concern — moral and professional. Moral dimension indicates the expectation of society from the teachers at different levels and the professional notion implies the quality of education catered in different educational institutions. Duly highlighted in the pointed opinion indeed.

When this particular incident was first reported in the newspaper I asked a senior and respected professor of the English Department about the occurrence of such incident in the past. He nodded his head positively. The inner message is such incident took place in the past but remained unearthened. This did not surprise me much

at least for one reason — immoral practice is universal phenomenon what varies is its degree.

Following this argument one might say the recent DU sex harassment incident has actually not tarnished the image in the sense that it never happened before rather indicated at the increased transparency of the reality. I did not find solace in what was said by the professor or am making a case to defend the behaviour of my colleague. Rather I would draw reader's attention to a wider issue of 'over all moral degradation' of our society.

Please enough to note that Medical Colleges are immune from such a vice but disquieted enough to read the story of an Asma, the innocent victim of doctor's sheer negligence. Shocking all the more is to read a doctor hitting the head of a nagging patient on the wall. Earnest request is not to misread the above examples as casting vitriol by one profession at another. It is to remind two things: one, increasing crude materialism is disintegrating the founding fabric of society at different levels and two, minimum significance of

ideological practices.

Two important domains of

the practices of ideology are

politics and religions. Unfortunately both are greatly deviated

from it and turn, sadly though,

as useful means to material gain.

Again there is little scope to

sound Platonic in this matter.

Didn't we hear of selfish

politicians of deceitful guru before?

Of course we did. What is

new in the present context is

the practice of materialism in an

ideological vacuum. Materialist

societies of the West could not

ignore it in the way of Christianity

and social welfare axioms

particularly in post World

War era. Unique in our situa-

tion is the 'anarchy' of the

ruling class and their lackeys.

Indulgence and motivated silence are now widespread.

The question is how to

change it. A complex matter indeed it is to change the society.

There are several ways — both

tested and untested. Some are

rooted in politics and some in

religion. At this juncture, in our

country, it might start from

civil society but of course not in

a partisan manner. There is urgent

need for dialogue on it right now.

To the Editor...

Iodine overdose

Sir, I would like to ask the authorities concerned if we in Bangladesh are adding the right amount of iodine to our salt. I was forced to reflect on this topic after I glanced upon a feature in an Indian magazine *Yemba* related to the above subject. In one of its back issues, August 98, a lady narrated her four years ordeal caused by iodine overdose. Initially her symptoms were, among others, heavy head, boils and pimples, decreased concentration, over sleeping, irritability, and impatience. These were the very symptoms I had been experiencing lately. Her problem worsened to excessive itches, pains blurred vision etc. Doctors and specialists could not diagnose her problem. One day she suspected that iodised salt might be causing these and after stopping its intake her troubles simply vanished.

Having nothing to lose by trying the same, I switched to normal salt and my problems also disappeared. Now I wonder if an overdose of iodine is the cause of my symptoms. Are the manufacturers adding iodine too liberally? In that case it could be extremely harmful as a surplus of iodine can disrupt the delicate chemical balance responsible for regulating different functions of the human body.

Furthermore it was men-

tioned in the said feature that in most developed countries potassium iodide is used in iodised salt. Whereas in India, due to commercial interest the preferred compound is potassium iodate, a highly toxic chemical — and studies in Australia have proved that it could cause a high incidence of Thyrotoxicosis.

I request the authority concerned to check if the suppliers are fortifying the salt with the right type of iodine.

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Autonomy to BAI

Sir, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka has completed its 60 years in agri-education on December 11, 1998. And we, attached to this institute have been demanding its independent institutional status for several years. Many committees have so far been formed in the past to review the feasibility of providing autonomy to BAI. Certain declaration and commitments were also made by the previous governments in this regard but unfortunately those have never been implemented.

Well, we in BAI deeply feel

that the present status of BAI

should be upgraded in the

greater interest of the nation.

The controlling ministry of

BAI, i.e. the Ministry of Agri-

culture has already forwarded the proposal to convert BAI into DU's Agri Faculty to the authority concerned. The Agriculture Minister on a number of occasions made her observation that BAI being an educational institution should run as under the Ministry of Education, and accordingly she had applied her good office in favour of the proposal to turn BAI into DU's agri-faculty. Now a national level policy decision is needed to decide the ultimate status of BAI.

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Islam's enemy

Sir, Frequent attacks and long-term embargo on Iraq and Libya, isolating Iran from rest of the world, attack on Afghanistan and Sudan, declaring Syria as a terrorist country, helping the occupant Israel makes it clear that US is dead against Islam and wants to destroy the unity of Muslims.

In fact, Mr Clinton and his puppet UK want to overwhelm the impeachment procedure by attacking Iraq and achieve their hellish intent of destroying Islam by killing innocent Muslims.

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A Management Story

DURING the first week of December 1998, the Ministry of Education of Peru, convened a seminar in the country's capital Lima. The subject matter of the seminar was the problem of spreading education to the remote corners of the vast country of Peru and its management. Officials concerned with the formulation of education policy of the country attended the seminar. So did officials of the World Bank and the European Union, the two organizations that picked up the tab of the seminar and education experts from Peru's South American neighbouring countries of Columbia, Mexico and Chile. We were two from Asia, an Indonesian education consultant and myself, representing BRAC, the organization that I work for.

"Why BRAC?", I asked one of the organisers of the conference. He replied that BRAC with 34,000 one-classroom non-formal primary schools in Bangladesh with 1.2 million students had perhaps the largest private educational network in the world. Although he did not mention, it did occur to me that President Alberto Fujimori of Peru, during his visit to Bangladesh in May 1997, had come to the BRAC Centre and was given a fairly detailed briefing on our non-formal education system. The impressions that he might have carried with him about the quality of our education management, could have had, I suspected, something to do with BRAC's invitation to the seminar and consequently with my being on my very first visit to Peru!