

Education's Malaise

The state of education in Bangladesh continues to be a source of major concern for anyone willing to devote time to the problems facing development prospects of this country. One such person is President Shahabuddin Ahmed who has, time and again, voiced concern about the deterioration of the environment in educational institutions. The president has long been a stern critic of the involvement of political parties in campus politics, and the criminality, which often characterises activities of major student groups at universities and colleges. But in a seminar on Saturday, the president went a step further and listed six problems, which are threatening to destroy the education system in the country.

The list presented by Shahabuddin makes it apparent that the problems have been created over the years by the way the education system has been managed. The lack of investment and efforts to create a pool of trained, highly motivated teachers have taken its toll on the quality of education at both primary and secondary levels. The administration and management of the system has been allowed to become as inefficient and wasteful, devoid of innovation and motivation, as any other government department. The lack of accountability means there is no incentive to improve the system. Consequently, nothing has been done to reform teaching methods, the syllabus and the examinations systems. On top of it all, politics has eaten away at higher education, turning universities into battlegrounds for political parties.

What all these mean is that the government has to effect fundamental and quite drastic reforms in the system in order to pull education out of the doldrums. This means giving education top priority in resource allocation, while ensuring effective accountability of education administration and management through decentralisation. Most critically, drastic improvement in the teaching methods as well as the system of secondary and intermediate level examinations would be required to bring education up to international standard. Campus terrorism needs to be handled as a law and order issue, with total disregard for political affiliations of the suspected criminals. All these would require strong political will, and the government would have to demonstrate such a will if its pronouncements on education are to be taken seriously.

Stop Filling the Lake, Now

We ran a series of stories on lake encroachment and land-grabbing in Gulshan-Baridhara area. Unfortunately, the practice continues unabated. Filling of the lake and gifting of plots to party favourites and business links have become commonplace in total disregard of environment and planned urbanisation. The residents of the area finally woke up from their slumber, took to the streets in protest of the RAJUK's lake-filling exercises, brought allegations against the defiance of a Supreme Court order that directed RAJUK not to 'disturb or destroy the greenery and the lake for the purpose of construction of any road or creating any residential or commercial plot on the lands or on the waters of Gulshan lake....'

The residents further claimed that RAJUK also violated a directive of the Prime Minister 'to stop filling waterbodies'. We are amazed by the audacity of RAJUK to flout these decisions and would very much like to know the source of strength of this statutory body to dare indulge in such unlawful activities. This organisation falls within the jurisdiction of a powerful minister who, as a matter of routine, must be in the know of these illegal actions of RAJUK. One wonders whether the two-year extension to the RAJUK chief's tenure was meant to encourage such gross violation. Not only the government has been mocked at but RAJUK has shown a total disregard also for the Supreme Court order by their insolent attitude. When Supreme Court order is violated and prime minister's directive is flouted the government is really put to a litmus test.

The reckless use of prime land in Dhaka city can only embolden land-grabbing all over the metropolis which has already assumed critical proportions in certain areas to the detriment of environment and planned urbanisation. Time has come when citizens' groups should rise in protest against these unfriendly and illegal actions of organisations, take them to the court, if necessary, as the media supported them to the hilt.

Another Booby Blast

This time a bomb straying into an earthen oven at a Khilgaon shanty exploded in the crackling fire snuffing out two children and injuring their parents critically. How did it come into the oven? Rahim Mia and Kajoli, the now deceased brother and sister, aged 6 and 12 respectively, had collected shreds of paper and polybags littered near the bus-stop area, unmindful of the lightweight explosive material in them, and gave these to their mother for use as oven-fuel. The unsuspecting mother lighted a match stick setting off the explosive that proved so lethal in its impact that the two children died almost instantaneously as their parents sustained severe burn injuries. The poor rickshaw puller's family is so much the poorer now without their children around them. This is an eye-opener to another hidden danger child security seems prey to.

One wonders whether we need de-mining the dust-bins or the littered garbages here and there. What is absolutely essential, however, is that some authority asserts to strike at the root of this lurking civic hazard. The law against illegal possession of explosive material will have to be strictly enforced. Occasionally we come to know about bomb-making dens and arrests made of elements involved, but are the cases against them pursued till the very end? How many of them have so far been punished? A police statement on the subject will be highly appreciated.

The broad citizenry will have to be sensitised through the media and at the community level about the reckless manufacturing of cocktails and bombs so that while they became cautious of the hidden danger they could also inform the police of the brewings in advance. Essentially, the police need to keep their own vigil though.

An Aberration in Terms of Civilization

The anti-Christian riots culminating in the gruesome murder of Graham Stains who was burnt alive with his two minor sons sparked strong reaction from myriad other quarters. The opposition Congress and Left parties unequivocally condemned and squarely blamed the BJP for the crimes. Even the coalition allies of the BJP government threatened to quit.

governmental ineptitude and electoral defeat. So they decided to pounce on a soft largest to wipe off much of its blemish.

That it had been an organised and orchestrated attacks on the Christians was obvious from the provocative pronouncements of VHP supreme Ashok Singhal for months and as many as ninety cases of anti-Christian violence recorded almost simultaneously during the year. When all the nation's fingers of accusation were pointing to the components of Sangh Parivar for the whole series of crimes with apparent acquiescence of the BJP government the latter however routinely denied involvement in any of them from the torching of the churches, raping of the nuns and burning of Bibles to the brutal killing of Graham Stains, an Australian missionary who dedicated thirty years of his life at the service of the lepers in an Orissa village. In spite of tell-tale evidences of the involvement of extremist Hindu groups like VHP, Bajrang Dal, the RSS, Swadeshi Jagaran Morcha and Sivsena in the recent rampage and carnage they are so far able to wriggle out of their complicity in the crimes.

As a result the Christian community distrustful of an administration which was both incompetent and partisan during the clashes cowers in fear and anxiety. In the meantime, the Parivar is tirelessly at work

to build up and emotional issue of their fabrication about the missionaries' mass conversion of the tribal Hindus to Christianity. It is obviously to gain political mileage by further consolidating Hindu vote — an imperative for BJP to close the hiatus for reaching solo the citadel of power in the next election. They did the same thing over the issue of Ram Temple construction on the site of demolished Babri Mosque. It paid them dividends during the subsequent general election.

cept constitutional guarantee of freedom to practise any religion and their proselytisation thus putting to question some of the settled norms of Indian polity.

Worse still, none — either from the government or from the BJP and its ideological allies — seems to be taking responsibility for the anarchic state of things now prevailing in the strife — torn areas of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Karnataka. In a flux of allegation and counter-allegation the aggrieved community in

hem, but strongly defends its own position on the communal issues both separately and collectively. Only an embattled prime minister angrily expressed his disgust that the things had gone beyond the limits of tolerance. But he carefully saved the skin of his party and its associates. Yet the party hardliners lashed out at their own government for doing what they called a U-turn on important issues including the inter-community relations.

The anti-Christian riots culminating in the gruesome murder of Graham Stains who was burnt alive with his two minor sons sparked strong reaction from myriad other quarters. The opposition Congress and Left parties unequivocally condemned and squarely blamed the BJP for the crimes. Even the coalition allies of the BJP government threatened to quit. But most importantly, the external reaction particularly of the diplomatic community has been significant. The crimes that evoke outside repercussion only point to their gravity. They have no doubt sullied the traditions of India's ancient civilization and tarnished the image of India of Gandhi's Ahimsa and Nehru's secular egalitarianism. They also have created a crisis of conscience for the nation. At this stage of civilisation and progress the antics of an anachronistic Sangh Parivar in a country of enlightenment



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

The VHP ranted about a "Christian conspiracy" to wipe out Hinduism in a country which is inhabited by 85 per cent Hindus. It finds 'intrigue' everywhere from the rise of Sonia Gandhi, a Roman Catholic, in India's political firmament to the award of Nobel Prize to economist Amartya Sen whose prescription of mass literacy, it fears, would be harmful to the Parivar's stranglehold over the lowcaste and Dalit Hindus — an easy prey for conversion. The VHP in a paranoia of conversion and threats to Hinduism also warns that it will not ac-

these states does not know whom to turn to for the redress of their grievances. That has all the more enhanced the minorities' despondency. The government responses to the crises are rather feeble and are confined to issuing bracing statement at the best and sending enquiry commissions to the trouble spots which prove inconsequential. The BJP spokesman only perfunctorily said: "Any effort to spoil mutual relations between various communities is not proper." The remorseless Sangh Parivar does not pinpoint any culprit for the May-

The Succession Problem in the Arab World

The uncertainty revolving around succession problem is only part of a dynastic crisis affecting a large number of Arab countries. President Assad of Syria wants his son Bashir to succeed him; Saddam Hussein has groomed his sons Uday and Qusai for the top job; and even in Egypt, members of the ruling party are championing the cause of Gamal, the banker son of President Mubarak.

KING Hussein of Jordan is dead. He was rare among the leaders in the Arab world in admitting his mortality, and taking his people in confidence about his illness. After the apparent failure of the latest treatment in the United States, he decided to return to Jordan to 'die in his own country'.

The succession drama that had unfolded in Amman during the last few weeks following King Hussein's deteriorating health has raised new concerns not only about Jordan's future, but also about the future of many other Arab countries. Some of these countries are facing serious succession problem. A number of ageing and ailing leaders are on their last legs across the Arab world. If mortality takes its natural course, the Arabs will be left with only one significant leader under 70: Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Let's first look at the situation in Jordan. A sense of uncertainty gripped the strategic kingdom located between Israel and two Arab countries with autocratic rulers. Jordanian forces were placed on special alert in case of any attempt by neighbouring Syria, Iraq, or Israel to try to take advantage of the crisis in Jordan to foment instability.

Last month, King Hussein removed his brother, Hassan, who had been Crown Prince and the King's confidant for the past 34 years. In an angry letter to Hassan, the King expressed disappointment with his brother's performance during his previous absences and, for the first time, revealed there had been sharp differences between them. Before leaving for the United States for treatment, he turned over the temporary operation of the country to Abdul-

lah, his eldest son, after formally naming him as heir to the throne. Abdullah commands the elite Special Forces in the Jordanian army.

During King Hussein's 46-year rule, he has used a unique combination of charisma, intelligence and luck (he has survived at least a dozen assassination attempts) to hold together his country which has been plagued by hostile neighbours, endowed with few natural resources, and where his Bedouin tribesmen are a minority. He survived a series of coups and assassination attempts largely because he knew how to maintain the respect of his security forces while neutralising challenges from ambitious and aggressive officers.

Little is known about Crown Prince Abdullah's fitness for office or political leanings, and even less is known about how the sudden change in succession will affect the country's fragile political situation. While his politics and diplomatic skills may be at question, many analysts believe that his military background will lead to a smooth transition after King Hussein and ensure stability in the Kingdom. Given that his wife is a Palestinian, it would definitely help in fostering a closer understanding with the majority Palestinian population in Jordan.

Jordan's army, in particular its special forces, has emerged as the most powerful institu-

tion outside the royal palace. So important is the military to the Jordanian monarchy that some analysts speculate that the King's abrupt decision to oust Prince Hassan as the Crown Prince was motivated in part because Hassan was unpopular with Jordanian security officials.

King Hussein's rule was dominated by a precarious balancing act. He needed the Palestinians, who constitute Jordan's business class, profes-



Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

sionals, and bureaucrats, to turn Jordan into a modern state capable of surviving on its own. But he had to be careful not to let the Palestinians become too strong. The King, a Hasemite, has been successful in winning over Jordan's predominantly Palestinian population, but trust between the two groups goes only so far. The officer corps in the Jordanian army consists largely of ethnic Iraqis or Bedouins. Palestinians are confined largely to technical and support services.

Now with the Arab-Israeli peace process in doubt, inflation at record level, and unemployment in Jordan estimated to be as high as 25 per cent, po-

fore the King and asked to be shot if Hussein thought he was a traitor.

But the uncertainty revolving around succession problem is only part of a dynastic crisis affecting a large number of Arab countries. President Assad of Syria wants his son Bashir to succeed him. Saddam Hussein has groomed his sons Uday and Qusai for the top job; and even in Egypt, members of the ruling party are championing the cause of Gamal, the banker son of President Mubarak.

In Syria, President Assad is about to start his fifth seven-year term. His health has deteriorated significantly in recent years. Many people believe he is

promoting his son, Bashar Assad, as his successor. Bashar, a British-trained eye physician, was recalled to Damascus in 1994 after his brother Basil was killed in a car accident. Basil, with an army background, was originally regarded as his father's successor.

Many Syria-watchers have expressed opinion that too many vested interests have grown up during Assad's regime who are unlikely to gamble on an untried youngster like Bashar. According to this group, a collective leadership headed by Vice-President Abdelhalim Khaddam is more likely, with Bashar as part of it. Interestingly, Khaddam is a Sunni rather than a minority Asawite like Assad and most of his generals.

Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, though robust and healthy, has turned 70 and is completing his third term in office. Many of his advisors are urging him to name his banker son, Gamal, as Vice president. There is little likelihood that it is going to happen. But the succession issue is real tricky in Egypt. Mubarak came to power because he was vice president when President Anwar Sadat was assassinated in 1981. Mubarak has so far refused to name a vice president even though he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in 1995. There will be an alarming vacuum in the Egyptian political scene in the absence of President Mubarak.

A succession struggle is al-

is an outright challenge to the forces of sanity and tolerance in public life.

The questions are however being asked, why after all an innocuous minority mainly composed of backward Indian converts was to be targeted in this manner? The BJP's are for minorities is understandable, if not rational. But why a community constituting a little over 2 per cent of India's population should be subjected to its wrath? More so, when the number of India's Christians has in fact dwindled from 2.53 per cent in 1971 to 2.43 per cent in 1991 thus proving the VHP claim of mass conversion a hoax? The reasons, according to the critics, are political. BJP's anxiety and behaviours in recent months stemmed from the resurgence of Congress under Sonia Gandhi who is now considered threat to BJP's election. In BJP's calculation if she can be malign on religious ground and Hindu-Christian relation turned into a political issue the BJP's only road block can be removed in a future poll.

But it may prove to be a wishful thinking for BJP and its dream to neutralise Sonia Gandhi in India's politics can be highly preposterous. Because she does not derive so much power for her being Christian or otherwise as she draws it from her being a part of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Nevertheless, the BJP has, in its power game, introduced in India's body politic an aberration which will hold back India's progress also in terms of civilisation.

ready under way in Saudi Arabia. King Fahd has been intermittently ill since 1995, leaving most of the royal responsibilities to crown Prince Abdullah, his designated heir. But Prince Abdullah is himself 76 years old and faces a rival in Prince Sultan, aged 74. Prince Sultan is not only the third in line to the throne, he is also a full brother of King Fahd, while Prince Abdullah is only a half-brother of the King. Events in recent months has almost assured Prince Abdullah's accession to the throne. He is the commander of the national Guard, the tribal-based instrument of internal control and, as in Jordan, the underpin of the monarchy. Many original supporters of Prince Sultan within the royal family have now decided to side with Prince Abdullah.

However, there is still the question of who will succeed Prince Abdullah, given his advanced age. Will it be Prince Sultan, or Prince Salman, the influential governor of Riyadh?

The infusion of new blood into the hardened arteries of several regimes in the Middle East is long overdue. But it is not clear how the changing of the guard is going to take place. In most of these countries, the armed forces act as the major source of power. All of these jockeying for power threatens stability in the region once the existing rulers depart the political scene. It also creates a crisis of legitimacy, which can be eventually remedied with greater democracy, transparency, and economic success. Whether such democratic transition is going to take place in the near future is an open question.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Attitude towards public criticism

Sir, Those whose work are exposed to the public have to be mentally prepared to face criticism from all quarters. It is a part of the responsibilities of the job, whether it be the bureaucrats or the politicians or the preachers of goods and services in the private sector. The government (government and the politics (political parties involved) are also criticised by the general public, as this is a fundamental right (the court cases may go to the court, in exceptional cases).

Criticism vary in degree or kind. The correct attitude should be adopted towards criticism by those at the receiving end. But unfortunately in our country those criticised are too sensitive and lash out at the critics in an unbecoming manner. Even top leaders accuse others of conspiracies and anti-national stances. This holier-than-thou attitude must not be encouraged. The basic concept is that all citizens are equal, and any discrimination must be carefully watched. We give a lot of leeway to our leaders, some of whom tend to become contemptuous. This causes bitterness, hatred and spoils the atmosphere of free exchange of views. The public speakers have to change their public image before the microphone. The viciousness displayed is simply amusing and irritating. What's wrong with these egoistic guys? Change the style of delivery. Introduce new fashions (we are short of designers and cultural talents).

This is unfortunate. Coming to the other side, relevant criticism should not be gagged, and

discouraged. The quality of the observations may be poor or irritating, but it has to be taken in the stride. Many of the personalities who pose as leaders appear to be bigoted narrow minded and bigoted, and they lack sense of humour, and cannot stand leg-pulling. Showing a point is not the goal of life. The political speeches are always fiery and directed mainly at the opposition. This is not correct. It should be directed to the people for understanding and evaluation.

A Zabr
Dhaka

To National University authority

Sir, I appeared in MA final examination (English) in 1993 from BM College, Barisal under the National University. Unfortunately, I obtained 3rd class having shortage of two (2) marks from the 2nd class. However, the university authority had approved grace marks for the MA examinees of 1994 and it is already in effected. Due to this decision, I noticed that some of the MA examinees of 1994 obtained 2nd class having lower marks than me. I think we have the same right to get the grace marks in our MA examination. It may be mentioned here that we were the first batch which took admission in MA class under the National University in the session 1991-92. Earlier BM College, Barisal, was under Dhaka University while the grace marks were applicable for us.

Therefore, I would like to draw kind attention of the NU

authority to look into the matter from humanitarian point of view and take necessary steps to give grace marks to the MA examinees of 1993.

Rikta Mohinta (Monika)
Kavunia Main Road
Barisal Town, Barisal-8200

The Buriganga is dying

Sir, Allow me to express my gratitude to the organisers of the discussion meeting on Present status of the Buriganga River and water bodies of Dhaka held at the VIP lounge of the Press Club on 30th Jan '99. I was present in the meeting.

According to the speakers, if the pollution and encroachment of Buriganga continue at the present rate, it will die off within the next 10 years. I do think so. No expert on environment can show a way in which the dwellers of Dhaka city would be able to continue their existence in a minimum healthy environment without the existence of the Buriganga.

The river is now at the door of death. According to the DS, more than 82 per cent of human wastes of the city are dumped here. The causes have already been identified. They are households, mills, factories, markets, madrassahs, mosques etc.

So, now the authority should take all necessary steps in order to reinvigorate the Buriganga. It's not possible for the incumbent officials to share it alone. For this, a public movement is needed to create mass awareness among the people of the city in order to restrain the Buriganga from dying.

What do our leaders say in this regard? Do they have that much time to think about this? Life would be impossible if the Buriganga dies. Why are the leaders silent in such a serious matter? Why don't the prime minister as well as the leader of the opposition call the people to participate a procession towards the Buriganga in order to create mass awareness? It

might be jointly or separately? Are they unable to understand the consequence?

Kalyan Kar
Member, The Ideal Association
210/Jagannath Hall, DU

For a long-term plan

Sir, The worst flood has devastated Bangladesh recently. The government first did not give much importance to it and said that they would face the flood with the country's own resources. But opposition raised hue and cry and ultimately the government realised the magnitude of the flood. So they appealed for international help.

The flood could be anyway tackled combinely by the government, opposition, public, international bodies etc. — so credit for tackling the flood goes to all.

But to be up and doing during flood and forget it altogether after it is gone, is not the right thing. A long-term planning can save people from the misery being caused by flood. The government should go for that.

A F M Moeenul Islam
Chandragon RA, Chittagong

Crime and reward

Sir, In the January 28, 1999 issue of The Daily Star, two news items 'Return of the rapists at JU' and 'Rapists' eyes gouged out in Barguna' caught my attention. From the incident in Barguna it is quite clear how general public look upon the rapists, though law should not be taken in one's own hand and the offenders should be handed over to the proper authorities.

But we are appalled and outraged learning that the three students of Jahangirnagar University who were found guilty for raping and abetting the act has been allowed by the University authorities to sit for examination under a special arrangement. They are getting VIP

treatment, living quarters at the campus, car for movement and an exclusive exam hall. It looks like that instead of punishment, they are getting rewards for raping. If it is the situation of our country, we cannot expect justice in any field and if the country is being devoured by injustice, the evil will reign over good and the country will be doomed.

We further learnt that when general students went to the authorities for an explanation, the VC refused to see them.

By allowing this sorts of incidents to happen the government is also losing its credibility — so it would be wise to take proper actions where necessary.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Law keepers breaking laws

Sir, It was the first working day immediately after the long Eid holidays. The rush of patients at the doctors' chambers was a heap. The doctors were busy trying to give their good service. At such a busy hour the traffic police entered demanding that the doctors' car which was parked properly by the roadside must be removed from the road and on to the footpath! Why on earth should the law keepers ask to break the law? Since the doctor had to give fine once before for parking partly on the footpath. Now the same law keepers were demanding to break the law by parking the whole car on the footpath!

The reason is very easy to guess for anybody who knows the system of this country. The PM's motorcade was coming, so all the vehicles must be off the road including the parked ones! Are such rules for motorcades followed in other countries? Wasn't a promise made as part of AL's election campaign that law breaking would be stopped for the PM's motorcade? Sadly in this country it is a general rule to throw all promises in the air once one gets the power. For this how the public suffer they

never stop to think. How for them hundreds of people's fast becomes 'makru' because of the road blockade right at Iftar time.

To complete the story, the traffic police kept disturbing and nagging the doctors to take the car off the road. Although the doctor kept pointing out that the road was one of the widest and empty to serve their purpose. Added to that the driver had not come and it would be wrong to leave the patients waiting just to take the car on to the footpath. But to them other things are more important than citizens' problems and welfare.

Wonder when if every this attitude will change, to give the ordinary their due rights. Let's just hope and pray for that. What else can we do?

Dr G
Dhaka

"Citizens beware"

Sir, I have several relations and friends abroad and it is now over 20 years that I have been corresponding with them on an average at one letter a week. A domestic help of mine has been posting my letters all these years at the nearby post office and I have had no occasion to check the mailing cost of my letters as charged by the post office, nor do I consider it necessary to do so.

On going through Dr Sarah's letter under the above caption (DS 3.1.99) I got a little suspicious and a few days ago, I personally paid a visit to the post office in order to find out myself the actual mailing cost of a letter of standard minimum weight to the countries in concern. It was only then that I came to realise, to my great horror, that the post office has been over-charging me by about Tk 3 per letter since the past 20 years or so.

On that basis, the postal staff must have cheated me of about Tk 3000 to date.

A Quayyum
Gulshan, Dhaka