

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 bazaar 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.

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

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

That it had been an organised and orchestrated attack 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.

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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.

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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-

knowledges does not know whom to turn to for the redress of their grievances. That has all the more enhanced the minorities' dependency. 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 perfidiously said: "Any effort to spoil mutual relations between various communities is not proper." The remorseless Sangh Parivar does not pin-point any culprit for the May

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 underpinning of the monarchy. Many original supporters of Prince Sultan within the royal family have now decided to side with Prince Abdullah.

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 group around Vice-President Abdulhalim Khaddam is more likely, with Bashar as part of it. Interestingly, Khaddam is a Sunni rather than a minority Aswai 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.

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