

How to Save Our Universities? The Blemished Image

by Hayat Hussain

In our static and conservative society it is difficult to introduce any radical change in any field. But if we really consider education to be the main vehicle of our national progress then we cannot afford to sit tight with our eyes closed.

If we just have a look at what happened in Jahangir Nagar University in recent times we can have some idea about the degeneration of student politics. For a long time the general students of that university did not seem to have any option other than to be ruled by the rapist group of Chatra League or by the killer group of the same party. What a great thing, indeed! And how the feeble administration of the university dealt with the whole matter is known to all.

According to newspaper accounts the Vice-Chancellor was talking to the Prime Minister from the syndicate meeting over telephone to seek her advice on punishment. Or it may be so that he was instructed to consult her before awarding them any punishment. If the university is an autonomous institution then why does the Vice-Chancellor have to consult or ask permission from the PM on such matters? Obviously, because the offenders were all her student front members controlling the university through terror and violence. On the other hand it demonstrates the weakness of the present day Vice-Chancellors who lack personality, charisma and character to deal with such situations. It is because of the Act of '73 that some persons faithfully obeying the dictates of the ruling political party get preference over men of eminence, character and scholarship in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors.

That is why the Jahangir Nagar University students had to solve their problem by themselves, at least temporarily, while the administration made a farce of itself. This must have been a serious blow to the administration, itself for being so ineffectual and powerless vis-à-vis the pro-active students force that beat back the culprits and saved the university, at least, for now. This also demonstrates the apathy of the general students for nasty politics and their willingness to unite on important issues.

DU : A Concentration Camp

By all counts or accounts Dhaka University has become a concentration camp with most of its residential halls occupied by armed gangsters called cadres and now they all belong to only one party, viz. the ruling party. Things have never been so humiliating for the general students and often reports of their harassment and torture at the hands of these outsiders are reported in the newspapers. Ridiculously enough, even after all this, the university administration often boast of having a peaceful campus, a campus so

quiet at dagger point. This is the problem of having a hardcore party element as the head of such an exalted institution but, unfortunately, as has been mentioned earlier, the present regime has thrown off all the standard norms of appointing respectable persons to these posts. Prof. Anisuzzaman of Bengal Department could have been an excellent Vice-Chancellor for Dhaka University with well-known Awami sympathy. He was also a teacher of Sheikh Hasina and wrote the *Foreword* of one of her booklets. Or why not Prof. Harun-or-Rashid of Physics who has both seniority and scholarship and at the same time progressive background? In fact, this seniority and scholarship has become their disqualification because our rulers want not dignified men but obedient ones who will carry out their orders without the qualms of conscience.

CU: No Peace in the Horizon

In Chittagong University the underaged Vice-Chancellor, Prof Abdul Mannan, has kept the university closed for almost the last three months and one has become very skeptical about the future of this university. In choosing him as the Vice-Chancellor, the Prime Minister/Chancellor made no secret of the fact that she wanted a full-fledged Awami League worker among the teachers to take over as the VC. A far more hardcore Awami League is the newly appointed Pro-VC, Prof Abu Yusuf Alam and there is, reportedly, a tussle going on between them for a long time while the university has been enjoying unscheduled vacations one after another. The unelected VC of Chittagong University, Prof Mannan is not bothering to get his appointment legitimised by a senate election even after three years of his appointment but when his predecessor Prof RI Chowdhury was appointed VC by the BNP Government in the same way, Prof Mannan not only criticised it vehemently but also wrote several articles in the newspapers to prove the illegality of his appointment. A case was also filed in the court but it did not yield any result as of today. The only plus point

of Prof Mannan is that, unlike the most others of his political creed, he is honest and amiable. A section of the fundamentalists also like him because he is deeply religious and say extra prayers even during office time (may be out of nervousness). On the whole the university is in a mess and there is hardly any sign of peace in the horizon.

All other universities and most of the colleges in the country are now facing, more or less, the same problems, highly politicised and chaotic administration and chronic student unrest and indiscipline.

Guardians and the overwhelming majority of the students who are innocent see no change in the current campus culture unless there is a dramatic change in the country's political climate. For the present it depends entirely on the government to see sense in doing something meaningful to cleanse the campuses of dirty student politics. Every party seems to reverse its position vis-à-vis student politics when it is in power and when out of it.

And with that their so-called intellectual supporters also change their position just as quickly. When in power they want to control the campuses through student power and that explains why Awami League which demanded banning of students politics a few years ago when it was in Opposition is now bent on doing otherwise.

But the truth about the current times is that education or the campuses have never been affected as badly as they are now.

Some intellectuals and political analysts want to tell us that students are the vanguard of democracy and many glorious events of our past including the historic Language Movement are rightly attributed to them. But the old glory is no longer there. Moreover, time is an important factor. In the Fifties and Sixties student politics was essential and the character of the students movement at that time was very different. Unfortunately, the once venerated student leadership has now degenerated into terrorism, anarchy and what not. To dispel any confusion one thing should be made clear that banning student politics should not mean

banning youth politics. Only the campuses should be free from any and every kind of politics and there should be no student's organisation. This is only to keep the campuses clean, free from tension and totally committed to the pursuit of knowledge. But outside the campus the students should be allowed to associate themselves with any kind of youth politics they like. Let them be busy with it outside in the name of democracy or what ever it is but they mustn't bring it to the campus. I assume this is quite a reasonable thinking and we should all ponder on it more seriously.

A New Examination System

In fact, volumes can be written to suggest reform for our decaying universities, but within the limited scope of this article, I would like to deal with only two more points. One of them is about our existing examination system, which needs complete change and overhauling. The old integrity of the system is no longer there and now corruption is all pervading. Moreover, these days teachers do not seem to groom or patronise talent but party politics. So party connection is more important than merit in choosing and grooming their successors or future colleagues and that requires resorting to various irregularities.

To stop or, at least, minimise the scope of all this, examination system should be thoroughly changed. Though at present there is an internal and an external teacher for both setting and examining the scripts the system is not foolproof. The venue of the examination may remain as it is but the exam should be conducted entirely or in large measure by the other universities. They should set the questions, mark the examination scripts and after finalising the results send copies of the same to the parent universities. In this new system, however, the concerned teachers have to be very careful and responsible so that the examinees do not suffer due to unnecessary delay and mindless marking of scripts which are now common stories. Once adjusted the new system may help to check the anomalies that are clearly jeopardising our examination

system. Maybe, the Inter University Board (IUB) can play an important part in this.

A New Procedure for Teachers' Appointment

A teaching job in the university is no longer that precious or prestigious as it used to be once upon a time and for that, as hinted in the beginning, among many other things or factors, the University Act of '73 is not only one but is the main culprit. Even then its importance cannot be ignored since teaching is directly connected with the creation of important human resources. But the standard of teaching has declined so much that in most of the universities only 30% to 40% of the post liberation appointees may be considered eligible for such calling and it is worsening day by day. So, along with the change in the examination system and other reforms drastic change should be effected to arrest this decay and improve the quality of teachers or teaching. Once again, the Inter University Board can play an important part in it. At present the appointment of teachers is the responsibility of the concerned Department and the University but from now on it should go to a central body like the IUB or may be the UGC, which looks after the university funds. It should under no circumstances be left to the concerned university alone as the system is widely open to abuse. At the lowest rung of such appointments, i.e., at the entry point, a written examination may also be introduced in order to ensure the best possible selection and appointment. This will greatly reduce the scope for irregularities.

Now who will bell the cat? In our static and conservative society it is difficult to introduce any radical change in any field. But if we really consider education to be the main vehicle of our national progress then we cannot afford to sit tight with our eyes closed. Particularly, at this crucial time when we are at the threshold of the new millennium we have to do something really dynamic and meaningful to change the fate of this wretched country. Our politicians may be fearful and skeptical, but our intellectuals should realise the gravity of the situation and at least for once forget party or political considerations and cheap emotions and work with unity to do something good. I think the Association of the University Teachers' Federation can get a move on in this regard.

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The Role of North and Food Security

by Saiful Islam Shyam

If we look back to the recent history, we see, in the name of maintaining food security, north virtually crashed it as well as the indigenous agriculture of the developing countries. Against this background, developing countries must be left free to determine their own food security priorities.

by the World Bank to develop new specialised export areas. In Senegal and Mali, for instance, a profitable fruit and vegetable business for export was developed in private plantations to the detriment of the peasant economy. In Bangladesh, village based shrimp farming supported by World Bank encroached upon the development of paddy production with detrimental environmental implications. This boom in non-traditional exports did not last, however, because the same so called 'high value added' exports were developed simultaneously under World Bank guidance in a large number of countries leading to a subsequent collapse in prices.

Throughout the developing world, the pattern of 'sectoral adjustment' in agriculture under the custody of the Bretton Woods institutions, was unfortunately towards destruction of food security. Dependency vis-à-vis the world market was reinforced with a view to providing market outlets for US and European agricultural surpluses. 'Food aid' to Sub-Saharan Africa increased by more than seven times since 1974, while commercial grain imports more than doubled. Food aid is never given free. It is always sold by governments on local markets, however, below the domestic market price, and was no longer earmarked for say the droughtstricken countries of the Sahelian belt, it was also channelled into countries which until recently, were more or less self-sufficient in food.

Besides, gains in production in the last two decades were also characterised by a substantial increase in the international trade in food, with imports from the surplus-producing countries meeting the deficit in many developing countries. Net cereal imports of developing countries rose from an average of 20 million tons a year during 1969-71 to 67 million tons a year during 1979-81 and 89 million tons a year during 1989-91. Higher production and larger imports raised the per capita availability of food in the developing countries.

Hunger and deprivation, however, are no longer limited to the third world. The economic crisis is conducive to a process of global impoverishment resulting in unemployment, homelessness and low wages in the urban ghettos and shanty towns, and the destruction of the independent farmer in Europe and North America as well.

To be free from hunger is a fundamental right of every one,' says the Rome Declaration of the World Food Summit. This implicit consensus on the need to eradicate hunger, however, was diluted by the inability of

the food grains enterprises are not only the recipients of US 'food aid' but have become 'development brokers' in a wide range of agro-industrial projects funded under PL 480. With direct access to the World Bank, the US Department of Agriculture and national governments, they exercise a dominant role in shaping the agricultural policy of indebted countries. Developing countries were advised

the national representatives present to agree on who is to guarantee that right. In its interpretative statements for the record the Government of the United States made it clear that it believes that the attainment of any right to adequate food or fundamental right to be free from hunger is a goal or aspiration to be realised progressively that does not give rise to any international obligations nor diminish the responsibility of national governments to their citizens; specifically, the US made it clear that it does not recognise any change in the current state of conventional or customary international law regarding rights related to food.

This interpretation, which dissociates the phrase 'fundamental right' from its meaning states that while freedom from hunger is an international objective, it is not in the view of the United States as fundamental as patent protection or a ban on nuclear testing to warrant binding and even legally enforceable international obligations on all states. This reduces the role of the summit to one of setting targets, such as lowering the number of undernourished people by half by 2015, and of encouraging voluntary contributions to the realisation of its plan of action. This shift in agricultural production patterns, when combined with the deteriorating terms of trade for third world exports, and increased dependence on food imports, spells the end of food security.

If we look back to the recent history, we see, in the name of maintaining food security, north virtually crashed it as well as the indigenous agriculture of the developing countries. Against this background, developing countries must be left free to determine their own food security priorities.

The present situation of Nigeria is clear evidence of this. Nigeria went from food sufficiency to import-dependency under the various structural adjustments and food aid programmes forced upon it. It became sub-Saharan's largest food

importer. The main supplier was Cargill Inc. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Nigerian government tried to reverse this trend by reducing food imports and encouraging domestic food production. The US threatened Nigeria with counter-retaliation and increased tariff on Nigerian exports as the sale of Cargill would suffer.

The world food crises in 73-74, when food imports became unavailable to any price, the corporations needed merely to hold onto their stocks to create another international food crisis and then sell the stocks to the highest bidder.

The contention that the world can have food reserves held in private hands is fallacious on its face. Private traders are in the business to turn investment into profit as rapidly as possible. To expect that a multiplicity of private traders would or should manage the acquisition and release of foodgrain in a manner which will meet the goals of a conscious reserve police — to flatten the widest upward and downward fluctuations in market price and to maintain a steady supply against times of shortage — would be contradictory. In reality food reserves in private hands are not reserves at all.

The US and other industrialised nations of the north are trying to change the meaning of food security from a fundamental human right to participation in global markets, which excludes that large number of the poor without adequate purchasing power. They are also trying to redefine food security to exclude food safety issues. Food security has lawyers, meant adequate, nutritious and culturally safe food.

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The Tug-of-War Politics

by Abul M Ahmad

There is need for more Managers than Directors, well versed in system maintenance. Local national politics badly needs a BMRE. Will it happen, willingly, in a planned way, or by sowing the wild oats?

TUG-OF-WAR bipolar politics, spearheaded by the two main warring political parties (AL and BNP) dominated the Bangladeshi political scene throughout this decade since the overthrow of the autocratic government in 1990.

After the reign of virtually monoplistic regime during the immediate post-liberation period — a phase which ended after four years, in 1975, under tragic circumstances (political assassination) — maritally-oriented regimes had to come in to fill in the vacuum. The next change came after 19 years (since 1971), when democracy was dragged back onto the stage (a small political platform) by the joint movement of the two formidable factions in a street movement.

This street movement entrenched a political culture of agitation and violence which the people are experiencing today, thanks to the advantage the political leaders have taken of the cue. This negative style of damage and interruptions in the form of violent hartals (initiated by the same two major political parties, now clashing against each other) is another phase of the political development of the Bangladesh society.

Now this tug-of-war tactics gives way to political alliances, just announced by four parties, led by BNP. Soon after the leftist groups, including Dr Kamal's

GF, announced third platform contest the coming general elections. Another new party is likely to be announced soon by rebel Tiger Kader Siddique of Tangail, who walked out of the AL and lost the recent by-election.

The isolation of the ruling party will be more acute if, at a later stage, the three platforms mentioned above, join together to fight AL at the next general election. According to a public poll, one third of the voters are undecided, and both AL and BNP enjoy (each) the support of one-fourth of the respondents (currently AL and BNP enjoy 37% and 34% seats respectively, per last elections).

It should be a fair contest, if conducted in a neutral manner. Either of the two major parties (with associates) has the chance to win or lose, depending on the voters' mood at the last moment (the marginal votes may become critical). But the ruling party has the disadvantage of a self-created Check List of governance, as the voters decide — the politicians naively believe that they are the only players in the game of the political musical chairs.

The politicians who will succeed and remain in circulation are those who can adapt to CHANGES (note the rapid rise globally in the rate of change). Politics in the LDCs is apt to be rather rigid, with too few new players in a small operating field (due to economic and literary handicaps).

The voters have now more options available, compared to the political 'ware and services' on sale these days, in contrast to the entrenched options mummified in old, stagnant policies and strategies. The political salesmanship is at stake, because it is under test from many changing fronts — whether it is viable with the topical political environment and current level of public consciousness of political blurt. Old slogans may no longer work, and traditional allegiances have to be wrapped up and offered in modern packaging.

The ivory towers have to come down. Real estate business is thriving in the same way the business of the State must thrive. There is need for more Managers than Directors, well versed in system maintenance. Local national politics badly needs a BMRE. Will it happen, willingly, in a planned way, or by sowing the wild oats? This is the first choice; after it is heaven or hell, as the players decide — the politicians naively believe that they are the only players in the game of the political musical chairs.

Indonesia Faces Another Movement?

Aceh's Separatist Ambition on the Rise

by A S M Nurunnabi

There is no support for an Acehnese referendum among Indonesians and the international community. The military could sabotage any vote before it even happens, resulting in a repeat of East Timor-style violence. If the president withdraws his promise, the Acehnese may push harder for a total separation.

ON November 8 last, hundreds of thousands of protesters swarmed into Aceh's provincial capital of Banda Aceh to clamour for an independence referendum. Within a day Indonesia's new President Wahid had cut short a whirlwind overseas tour to head back to Jakarta to deal with the growing crisis. With the massive rally igniting fresh fears about the stability of the world's fourth most populous nation, Indonesia's new president has a serious problem on Sumatra's overheated northern tip.

Much like newly independent East Timor, Aceh has been clamouring to break away from Indonesia since the 1970s. Aceh hasn't exactly gotten much out of being part of Indonesia. Ever since Indonesia won independence from the Dutch in the 1940s, Jakarta has promised autonomy and wealth to the fiercely independent province. Under former president Sukarno, Jakarta sent in an army and took the lion's share of the province's rich natural resources. To suppress an independence rebellion, Suharto declared martial law in 1998. Since then, Aceh has seen a campaign of terror carried out by Indonesian armed forces. Jakarta siphoned off about \$4 billion a year in natural gas revenues and sent back less than 1 per cent of that in development aid. Meanwhile, the Army razed villages, murdered and tortured suspected independence sympathisers.

Thus the Acehnese have remained alienated from Jakarta, scarred by years of human rights abuses and economic inequities. Freed from such ills, rebels from the Free Aceh movement enjoy fervent popular support. Clearly, Aceh presents a crucial test of Wahid's leadership.

To his credit, Wahid proclaimed Aceh a top priority as soon as he took office. However, confusing presidential comments on the possibility of an independence referendum and rebel overtures have since invited wide-ranging speculation: is Wahid cleverly buying time by appearing to conceded Acehnese demands. Or is he squandering credibility by promising something he may be unable to deliver?

Beneath his new veneer as a serious statesman, some of his statements reveal flashes of the old 'Gus Dur' that many Indonesians care and know him so well: pioneering yet puzzling, dramatic yet dilatory. Early last month, at a new conference on Aceh, he declared 'I support referendum as flatly as possible.'

Rumours of a referendum

have been circulating in Aceh for months. The Acehnese have been pushing for a referendum since 1995, when they held a referendum on autonomy. The military has been trying to suppress the movement, but the Acehnese have been pushing for a referendum since 1995, when they held a referendum on autonomy. The military has been trying to suppress the movement, but the Acehnese have been pushing for a referendum since 1995, when they held a referendum on autonomy.

There is no support for an Acehnese referendum among Indonesians and the international community. The military could sabotage any vote before it even happens, resulting in a repeat of East Timor-style violence. If the president withdraws his promise, the Acehnese may push harder for a total separation from Jakarta. Wahid's magnanimous words may have set the stage for harder feelings between Jakarta and Aceh — and perhaps more violence to come.

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