

Thought-provoking Exam Results

THE results of Secondary School Certificate Examination, the biggest public examination conducted by five education boards in the country, have mirrored a systemic wastefulness we can no longer turn a blind eye to. Of the total 9,28,391 candidates taking the tests all over the country only 3,81,762 have come out successful making for a 40.36 per cent pass figure. In other words, almost 60 per cent failed to cross the hurdle. Our first question would be: where do these overwhelming number of frustrated adolescents go? A segment of them, along with those carried over from the failed batches of previous years, would reappear at the next year's tests but a large majority of them are likely to find themselves into the wilderness. This time the percentage of failure being the largest in last five years we have on our hands a stupendous problem to keep on course — for their own good and the good of the society.

The size of the debacle at the exams is essentially reflective of poor educational administration, flawed and sloppy class-room instructions, lack of special coaching to weaker students and encouragement of short-cut to success, like recourse to cheating. These are all a part and parcel of what we regard as an worn-out education system.

Nowhere in the world such a massive waste of youthful potential is allowed to recur year after year risking an avalanche of morbid generations. So, our basic accent would be on a policy position whereby most of the candidates who are sent up for public examinations will pass them.

We are for one major terminal phase after the SSC or HSC exams whence a vast majority should have the opportunity of opting for technical or vocational education dropping off from the so-called mainstream. If higher education were truly selective and knack or quality-oriented then a pressure would have been automatically exerted from the top on the conventional base-level cravings for climbing the ladder of white-collar academic degrees.

That said, we now congratulate those who have come out with flying colours, especially the high achievers whose list happily includes a large number of girl students. But a majority of the students who have passed are sure to find it difficult to get themselves admitted into institutions of higher learning, that being another kind of waste staring in our face. The education system as a whole needs to be recast.

Good Augury

IN a somewhat gloomy picture of arsenic mitigation measures being on an uneven keel, the experimental use of water filters to remove high concentration of arsenic from tubewell water at a relatively cheaper cost certainly sounds like a good augury. We appreciate and welcome the initiative being jointly taken by the government and the World Bank to address the massive public health problem. The technology adopted to carry out the important task of ensuring supply of pure drinking water to six thanas at this experimental phase has proved to be environment-friendly and effective. Furthermore, it is also showing signs of acceptance among the villagers using tubewell as the only source of water. True, it would be a daunting task to have them switch over to alternative sources of water but we have to convince them anyway about those. We request the authorities to take steps to popularise the technology among the masses through an all-out national campaign.

Alongside, persuasion must go on at the grassroots about short-term options to ensure safe drinking water supply, including rainwater harvesting, boiling water from ponds and other simple arsenic-removal techniques. Alternative sources of drinking water are our priority now. While we continue to devote ourselves to patient management and sustainable options there is hardly any time to waste on short-term mitigation measures to be set on the roll. We must rise up to the occasion to save ourselves from this impending plague called "arsenicosis." We have to reverse the situation at any cost. We also request the political parties to help the cause by taking up arsenic-mitigation on their agenda.

Justice Taking its Course

THIS is a strange country where the wanted criminals walk freely under the nose of the law enforcers while a child is tied up in handcuffs even on his sick bed in a hospital with as many as four constables standing guard over him as if he was the most dangerous criminal in the country. This is the story of a 10-year-old boy Jewel who was arrested from Gandaria last May by the police in an injured condition. On being produced before the court he was sent to jail and when his condition deteriorated he was eventually moved to DMCH for treatment. There he lay shackled before the court ordered removal of the cuffs around his feet.

The pathetic story was published in a largely circulated Bangla daily and it was immediately picked up by Ain-O-Salish Kendra, a legal aid body which filed a writ in the High Court. The learned judges issued rule on the officials concerned and ordered transfer of the child from DMCH to BSMU Hospital for better treatment. Moreover, Jewel has been freed from the handcuffs as these violated Sections 31 and 35 of the Constitution. The respondents were also ordered to present Jewel in person before the Court on 26 June, 2000.

Jewel must consider himself lucky because his case was reported by a newspaper and taken up by a legal aid group. There are several others suffering behind the bars without trial. We feel relieved for Jewel but we feel concerned for others like him. When able-bodied adult killers and terrorists move freely around, a child like Jewel receives excessive police attention for something which at best could be addressed in a correction centre if he truly were a wayward boy.

Two Kinds of Populism Between Bihar and Mauritius

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Most FIs use Mauritius only as a post box. Thus, a \$750 million company with an expenditure of tens of millions in the US spends just \$25,000 on its Mauritius "operation."

round-the-clock contactability.

But those who argue thus ignore the free connections given to employees of MTNL — the very model of corporatisation that they want DoT to adopt. They also ignore that railway and airline employees get similar benefits the world over.

These commentators did not feel outraged when MTNL announced free phones for anyone who subscribes to its Internet service. Nor were they shocked at the Rs. 8,000 crore private operator telecom scam. Even less did they protest against the government's plan to unduly favour Internet users: they can now access the Net from anywhere at the cost of a local call.

This is in a country where less than 0.5 per cent have computers! Making the 21st century cheaply accessible for the elite is not "populism": it is post-modernist prudential! Is it possible to detect a touch of class or an anti-Dalit bias here, perhaps?

Mr Paswan's populism is

Bihar-style, patronage-driven, directed at large numbers. But we have another kind of populism, far nastier, which caters to the topmost layer of the elite.

This is Mauritius-style populism, with a conduit to foreign institutional investors (FIs). Mauritius, less than one-hundredth the size of India, is the source of 60 per cent of our FI investment — much larger than the US. Mauritius is crucial to the post-1992 \$11.8 billion portfolio investment.

The reason for this oddity is simple. Like Fiji, Mauritius is a tax haven, with which India has a double-taxation avoidance treaty. Fund managers can use a Mauritius address and pay no tax on huge capital gains. The bonanza runs into \$3 billion. This tax-dodge has driven our artificial stockmarket boom. The loss to the exchequer is estimated at Rs. 3,000 crore-plus.

This past March, income-tax officials in Mumbai noticed the

oddity and issued notices to 24 of the 136 Mauritius-based FIs, demanding proof that they were Mauritius "residents." The institutions panicked. The Sensex tumbled.

That's when finance minister Yashwant Sinha stepped in. Mr Sinha, like Mr Paswan, is a Bihar. But he is an ex-IAS officer with Big Business contacts who teamed up with a variety of politicians, before settling on the BJP with RSS help.

So keen was Mr Sinha to pump sunshine into the markets that he got the Central Board of Direct Taxes to "clarify" in April that a mere certificate from Mauritius that a company is resident there is sufficient proof that it shouldn't be taxed.

Mauritius-style populism has since hit the headlines and featured in a public-interest litigation filed by the Azadi Bachao Andolan, a semi-Gandhian organisation. In response, Mr Sinha first charged there was a "systematic campaign" of

defamation against him, and threatened to sue the newspaper which alleged that his daughter-in-law (Ms Punita Kumar Sinha) benefited as an investment manager with the Oppenheimer Group.

Mr Sinha has done little to refute the tax-dodge allegations. His media supporters, however, have launched a disinformation campaign. Why "crib" about the tax loss (only Rs. 3,000 crore)? Why forget that the "basic purpose" of double-tax avoidance agreements is "investment promotion" (read, give rich FIs huge tax breaks)?

One commentator, a market speculator, even accused the petitioners of having "Stalinistic objectives." It is hard to miss the irony of Gandhians being termed Stalinist, and even harder to accept that abuse can substitute for reasoning.

The relevant issue here is simple. The public exchequer has lost thousands of crore in Banana-Republic style tax eva-

sion. Thus, the Sensex has doubled over the past two years. But capital gains tax receipts have stagnated. (In the US, by contrast, such receipts have kept pace with the market.)

Most FIs use Mauritius only as a post box. Thus, a \$750 million company with an expenditure of tens of millions in the US spends just \$25,000 on its Mauritius "operation."

True, such fly-by-night operations preceded Mr Sinha's tenure and were condoned by governments eager to attract foreign capital. But Mr Sinha was the first minister to actively order the CBDT to withdraw tax notices after they were issued in good faith.

This makes him *prima facie* culpable of misleading the public and causing a huge loss to the exchequer. It won't do to pretend that double-taxation treaties take precedence over sovereign tax laws. No international treaty can. Even if the Mauritius treaty is abrogated, the issue of recovering lost revenues will persist.

Mr Sinha must face this issue squarely without personalising it. If Mr Vajpayee died not governing him to do so, he will only have proved that in the race between Patna and Port Louis, between public and private sector scams, it is Mauritius-style rackets that prevail.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon is Not What it Seems

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

One can gauge the difficulty of peacemaking in the Middle East from the fact that Mr. Sharansky, a former peace activist in his native Russia, is considered a moderate, a dove in Israel. Mr. Sharansky has no qualms about demanding reparations from the Palestinians in exchange for giving back to them the lands that were forcibly taken away from them in 1967.

Menachem Begin's residence listing the number of Israeli soldiers killed in Lebanon. An angry Begin had his supporters put up a rival billboard with the number of days northern Israel was not hit by shells coming from Lebanon. When the Hezbollah shelling resumed, that billboard lost its meaning.

With the passing of time, the occupation of southern Lebanon, extremely unpopular among the Israelis, became a huge headache for the Israeli leadership. At the last count, close to 1000 Israeli soldiers have been killed within the narrow strip over the last 18 years. It may not seem like a large number, but for a small-population country like Israel, it is huge. It is like 40,000 Bangladeshi soldiers being killed. One of Ehud Barak's election promises was that he would withdraw from Lebanon within a year of being elected. He was hoping to sign a deal with Syria to rein in the Hezbollah after Israel's withdrawal. When Syria refused to deal, Israel withdrew hastily and unilaterally, a la America's sudden withdrawal from Hanoi in 1975.

Whichever way one looks at it, Israeli withdrawal is a victory for Hezbollah and Lebanon, and a defeat for Israel. Right-wing Israelis argue that the unilateral withdrawal was an embarrassing sign of weakness, which will only invite more Arab attacks. The Shiite radicals claim that Israel's withdrawal is a sign that Muslims are superior fighters, and that this willingness to fight will result in more victories in the future.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak's rationale is quite different. For the first time since Israel made its first incursion into Lebanon in 1978, there is a clear-cut border between Israel and Lebanon. As Israeli political theorist Yaron Ezrahi observed: "Barak discovered something extremely important in Lebanon, that a border is a source of power. Because

when you don't have a border, you have a constant problem justifying the use of power." Whenever Israel has found itself in conflicts without borders — south Lebanon, the Palestinian intifada in the West Bank — it has always lost, because it always found it difficult to win support, either at home or abroad, for force that is required to win a war without borders. Israelis will only sanction such force and sacrifice for a war of clear-cut self-defence over a defined border.

By defining its border with Lebanon, Israel can defend it with all its considerable might. It can use the Israeli air force, unrestrained; it can hold the Lebanese and the Syrian governments responsible for the actions of those within their borders and under their domain of influence respectively. It will now have the backing of the world community for self-defence along the Lebanese border. Most Israelis do not buy the right-wing's line that, "If you won't fight for this thing, you won't fight for anything," because most Israelis can make a distinction between what is worth fighting for, and what is not. "Mr. Barak's drawing that distinction in Lebanon was not a loss of will," it was a loss of willingness to go on doing something self-defeating," says Tom Friedman of The New York Times.

Friedman adds: "The great mistake Western observers make when writing about Arab-Israeli affairs is assuming that only Israelis want to raise their living standards, send their kids to college and get better jobs, and that those aspirations apply to Muslims, particularly Muslims fighting in Israel. In view of the Israeli right-wingers, the Muslims just want to kill the Jews and the Jews just want to die and the Israelis live to surf the Web. So the Jewish right accuses the Muslims of not wanting a better life for their families, and they accuse Israel of wanting it too much.

being too ready to compromise instead of fight."

"In reality, both people aspire so much the same things. Yes, there are Muslims in south Lebanon dedicated to destroying Israel. But they are in the minority, and they can be effective only when the majority is ready to tolerate them and pay the price of their hatred. But the vast majority of the southern Lebanese wanted the Israelis out of their lives so they could make their own better. And now that the Israelis are gone, few Lebanese are prepared to sacrifice their future to a self-defeating fantasy of marching on Jerusalem," Friedman concludes.

For lasting peace in the Middle East, Mr. Barak should seize the moment and conclude a fair and just peace with the Palestinians. Giving up 95 per cent of the West Bank that Israel captured in 1967, will not be enough. Israel will have to cede Arab East Jerusalem and the control of the Al Aqsa mosque and Dome of the Rock com-

pound to the Palestinians. It would be easy. As the writer found out on his visit to Palestine three years ago, the holiest shrine in Judaism, the Wailing Wall, is but an outer wall of the Al Aqsa mosque compound. Sharing these two holy places will require extremely creative solutions. Israel too must relinquish the fantasy that it can have peace with the Muslim world while occupying Islam's third holiest mosque, Al Aqsa.

On June 6, Mr. Nathan Sharansky, Israel's Interior Minister, wrote an article in The New York Times, criticizing Rabin-Peres-Barak's rush towards peace with the Palestinians based on the "assumptions" of Oslo, and praised Benjamin Netanyahu for demanding "reciprocity" from the Palestinians. Mr. Sharansky states: "In making painful compromises, we must demand the same in return from the Palestinians." Giving the Palestinians Abu Dis, an area only a few meters from Jerusalem's Old

City, on a silver platter will not help us achieve that goal. If Mr. Barak really intends to reach a final agreement resolving the thorniest issues, then why is he willing to transfer Abu Dis without demanding a concession in return? If, as he has stated, he is giving it as a down payment, one wonders how the full bill can be paid while preserving the undivided capital of which he has so repeatedly spoken."

One can gauge the difficulty of peacemaking in the Middle East from the fact that Mr. Sharansky, a former peace activist in his native Russia, is considered a moderate, a dove in Israel. Mr. Sharansky has no qualms about demanding reparations from the Palestinians in exchange for giving back to them the lands that were forcibly taken away from them in 1967. The world is developing amnesia regarding the fact that the state of Israel was founded on the forcible expulsion of the Palestinians from their homelands. There is something immoral in the very recent (Russian, mifr) Nathan Sharansky making demands of the Palestinians, and telling the Palestinians, who have lived on and tended the land for thousands of years, where they can live and what they can have.

OPINION

Who Gives Licence to Kill, Who Saves the Killer?

Dr. Deepika

Let us start off today with a very trivial trivia. There are three items mentioned in the title I have chosen for this article. The three items are a mobile Nokia set, an innocent businessman's dead body and a ruling party MP's son. Now, the trivia is — does any one see any sort of connection between these three items? The chances are very slim that a connection can be worked out immediately. Unless you are a rich spoiled brat, just returned from the United States, who is also the son of an MP, and especially if his rich daddy is in power — only then can a connection be formed between the three items mentioned within the sick twisted mind of that individual. Because that is exactly what happened on the evening of Wednesday, the 24th of May.

No matter how much we write in the dailies or hold seminars or even wear black badges as a sign of protest, businessman Shibu will remain dead, his three year old daughter and one-and-a-half year old son will remain fatherless, Mrs. Iftekhar will still remain without a husband. But my point is not that. My point is, will the suspected murderer and his accomplices and his rich powerful daddy remain above the law too? Will the victim's family keep on receiving death threats over the telephone? Recently some people have started threatening to kidnap the baby daughter of the deceased, isn't that the sign of an ugly mind? Where are our intellectuals now? Are they scared to lift their pens and write a word or two about it? Are they scared that their own lives might be in peril if they do so?

While I was out shopping in a local Banani store a certain commotion attracted my attention. Though it was pouring down with the early monsoon rain, yet some individuals wearing "lungis" were screaming on the top of their lungs. They were selling a tabloid which had the details of the murder printed on it. Some were purchasing them out of curiosity, some out of humanity. What has happened to our society now? It is not that hawkers who should be screaming to get people's attention; the intellectuals, writers and columnists should do so. If pen is really mightier than the sword then this is the time to prove it. Not only tabloid should print the details about the murder. Where are the famous dailies? Recently the Bengali dailies have

been brave enough to print such news with bold headlines. What about the English dailies? The pens and word processors of an editor are far more powerful than dozens of other writers. Shouldn't the editors and journalists be pitching in now?

The legal system is applicable for each and every single individual. These culprits of the society should be tried in court. Where is the Home Minister's fiery speech now? Is it because the suspected murderer's father is a ruling party MP and therefore should be spared? What about the Opposition party? They are well known for their clumsy excuses to start off a strike and non-cooperation, what about this? Shouldn't they rather be cashing in on the murder, raise the sentiments of the public and hold the Government accountable? Whenever such a murder is committed we see the Prime Minister or the opposition party leader next to the family members trying to console them. Though it is for publicity, others say, how come even this publicity is not taking place this time? Are both the Government and the opposition in a fix what to do?

These children of our powerful MPs and ex-mps make me sick to the stomach. Just because they have the money to blow in foreign countries, just because they have fathers or uncles in power, just because they have the connection to bring in and possess illegal arms — they feel they have a license to kill and still remain untouched! Has Dhaka become what Chicago was back in the days of the ruling godfathers?

After the murder took place it is good to know that our boys in blue have become extremely busy investigating. But, unfortunately they are investigating for the wrong reasons. They are out there to cover things up. They have now come up with the story that the runaway vehicle was not only stolen but it had false plates too. Now they have come up with the true owner of the vehicle all of a sudden. They are carrying out "declared" investigations in the MP's residence, because then the MP and his son are mysteriously "not at home". Suddenly the political leaders are pitching in to provide character certificates for the murderer. Apparently the suspected murderer, was never heard talking in a loud voice even. Fine, that's because he has guns to replace his vocal chords. I wonder if the same politicians who are sud-

denly talking nonsense and even showering the suspected murderer with praise would change their tune if any one of their family members got shot instead? Heaven forbid! Because then all hell will break loose. Would the Government or opposition intervene if the deceased was an active member of either political groups?

Our highly efficient police have discovered that the murderous trio have disappeared from sight. According to them they have either run away or are absconding. But, people have seen Mr. Jewel, our prime suspect, being escorted by his rich and powerful daddy. And what about Mr. Jewel's accomplices? They were seen roaming around the Mohakhali area too. Are we to believe that the police are truly failing to pinpoint them, though they are roaming around in public and that in broad daylight too? Now the police have even carried out an eyewitness of an investigation in the MP's residence. Are we to be fooled that easily? Are we to believe that the family of Mr. Iftekhar Ahmed will never get true justice?

What is happening to our society? Why is there a new breed of class with illegal weapons roaming around our city? Who is to be blamed for this? The Cable TV network — because there is too much violence shown? Parents — because they are not as strict as they should be? Police — for not doing their job properly? The Government — for encouraging these anti-social and immoral acts to continue without implementing a strong hand? The System — for being upside down? Who is to go to the family of the deceased, look at Mrs. Iftekhar Ahmed weeping and tell her justice will be done? Who is to go to the younger brother of the deceased and tell him not to worry and justice will take its own course. Where is the useless Public Safety Act now? Do you have the guts to approach the lost expressions of a 3-year-old girl and a year-and-a-half-old boy and tell them that their daddy will have justice? Will it bring back their daddy? What about the guarantee of other daddies in the city? Can the government give them protection? Be aware ruling party, these are not good signs. Be aware government, these will arouse the public's sentiment against you. And right now you can't afford that. History neither forgets nor forgives.

To the Editor ...

The World Environment Day

Sir, On the World Environment Day (5 June) the first thing that came to me is the recent announcement of the construction of NAM summit centre at the Manik Mia Avenue across the Sangsad Complex. And to build a power sub-station for this centre a number of trees have already been cut down replacing a rare patch of greenery from the city. It is said that when a line of elm trees are cut down to make way for a road, the road is named Elm Street to venerate the fallen trees. Do we have any such plan?

Another environmental thought was provoked by the news of a shopping complex being established within the BDR campus. (Does the authority know that there is nearly a crore of square feet of commercial space advertised everyday?). I was always impressed by the well-kept green within the BDR headquarters. But alas! Trade and commerce are getting the better of environmental considerations. The musings are repeatedly interrupted by what is called noise pollution. Just beside my residence a high-rise apartment is under construction. And the developer has installed a brick-crusher (which produces more noise than brickbats) right in the middle of a thick human habitat. Near to this location there is a city corporation prescription of noise level in 'decibel'. What an irony!

I know that in future there will be many speeches stressing

on the importance of 'environment', newspaper supplements and editorials will be giving us knowledge on the same issue but will the situation ever improve? Will Dhaka ever be able to free itself from the curse of being termed as the most polluted city of the world? Only time will tell.

MAH
Dhaka

"Naming culture"

Sir, This is in reference to the letter published under the above heading by Ms. Nur Jahan (DS, 20 May 2000). In the letter the writer has mentioned that Patenga Airport of Chittagong is soon going to be named M. A. Hannan Airport. Chittagong and she has objected to this naming. But I would like to know what is the problem of naming such establishment after a towering personality and one of the heroes of our liberation war? For the writer's information, many airports throughout the world have been named after great personalities like King Abdul Aziz International Airport, Saudi Arabia; Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi; John A. F. Kennedy International Airport, New York etc. If those could be named after famous personalities then what is the harm of naming Patenga Airport as M. A. Hannan Airport? Ms. Jahan should know that M. A. Hannan was a man of great reputation and his contribution to our independence struggle will always be remembered. It is, thus, re-

ally very disheartening to note that one could object to such naming.

Utam Das
Logistic Shipping Services Ltd
Chittagong

Leading in gangsterism

Sir, Glorious (?) gang leaders Ershad Sikder and Shimul have catapulted Khulna into Bangladesh's number one gangster city (like the Chicago of old?), beating metropolis Dhaka, where all the concentrated power reside. The stories coming out from Khulna in the press read like top-class fiction — it is strange but true!

The bold way in which leftist underground leader Shimul is disclosing names to the police (under interrogation) means there might be a method in his madness — he is ready to sink clutching the floating straws, and the concrete anchors.

Evil destroys evil, that is the only way, as the good players are always in a minority. The bubble is bursting, and there will be no hiding place in the near future, as the abettors are brought to book. Bangladeshi entrepreneurs are striking black gold right and left, and ultimately, what is left of the booty, will have to be right, if the country is to be piloted safely. Confession is a great purgative — in public interest!

AZ
Dhaka