

President's Educational Concern

PRESIDENT Shahabuddin Ahmed sounded spot-on with his diagnosis of our educational syndrome on Monday marking the conclusion of an annual ritual called Education Week on a rather matter-of-fact note. What is more to the point, however, is the prescription he has given to try and cure the ailment from the root upwards. Primary and secondary level schooling being the rock-bed of any education system the President's attention has very rightly rivetted on to the same.

He certainly strikes a responsive chord in us when he says that 'irreparable damage' has been caused to the students' formative learning process by the disunity and divisiveness between government and private primary school teachers' organisations spearheaded by leadership squabbles within the teaching community. As their first duty to impart education to the children has been pushed to the background by the primacy of their bickerings, basic-level education has hit the abyss. As part of the same negligence syndrome, the teachers devote more time, and with an éclat as well, to private tuition than to class room duties. Resultantly, we have youngsters all around with very weak grounding in knowledge, only too prone therefore to cheating at the examination halls as their short-cut to 'success.' Little wonder, they also fall prey to offers of arms rather than of books allowing themselves to be political party proteges.

President Shahabuddin Ahmed proffered two suggestions for an improvement in the educational standards: first of all, political party leaders should not allow themselves to be parties to the teachers' internecine conflicts; and secondly, they must unitedly decide to form committees at the local community level to supervise the work of the teachers. We endorse the President's recommendations expecting that political parties would co-operate wholeheartedly to implement them as apolitical agenda having to do with the nation's future.

Lessons for the Test Kids

TEST match cricket is more than skill. It is about endurance, temperament and, crucially, game-plan. The local lads, newcomers to the world of Test cricket, undoubtedly impressed many a pundit with their performance, especially in the first three days of the eventually four-day encounter. But at the crucial stage, they simply fell apart, not so much for poor skills or stamina but for temperament and strategy. Test match, between any two rivals anywhere in the world, has dynamics of its own. With every session, the complexion of a game changes. In the first three days, the momentum was in our hands, but, seemingly, the initial advantage caught our cricketers, not their rivals, off their strides. Unexpectedly auspicious faring apparently had them overwhelmed and it showed. There was sloppy ground fielding, sometimes result of over-enthusiasm, when the Indians batted; and, more importantly, reckless batting in the second innings when there was the need for pragmatic caution. The result was obvious, one must admit; but it could surely have been a bit more respectable.

In the midst of enthusiasm and excitement resulting from the fact that Bangladesh were playing Test match cricket for the first time, many of us tended to forget that the David's victory over Goliath in their first encounter hardly happens at this level of the game. Harsh indeed it is, but the reality is that we'll continue to have a teething time in Test Cricket for a few more years to come. New Zealand, who have recently won the ICC knock-out tournament in Kenya this year, had to wait for 45 matches over a span of 26 years before they could register their first win in Test cricket. Our conquerors Monday, the Indians had to wait for 25 Tests and 19 and a half years for their maiden victory. We hope, and are confident, that our boys won't have to wait that long.

We have said this before and say it again that cricket and, for that matter any major sport is not only an on-field affair. Off the field, a nation needs sustained investment to upgrade itself to a level of respectability. Our odyssey has just begun. The crushing defeat should induce positive vibes in the players, coaches and officials to bounce back soon, maybe in Bangladesh's next series.

SAARC Hiccup

UNFORTUNATELY Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar's scepticism, while opening the SAARC Senior Officials' Meeting in Colombo on Monday, over the future of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) may be shared by many today. India's unwillingness to sit with Pakistan across the table has indefinitely stalled the SAARC summit scheduled to have been held at Kathmandu in November last year. The stake in SAARC is basically twofold for the countries of the region. It is a forum for economic cooperation without political encumbrances in any form or shape. Since a disenchantment with a military regime is a political affair of a country, this should not have been allowed to impact on the fate of summity cycle the way it has done, because the track-record shows that military rulers from Pakistan had attended previous summits along with heads of government or state from other member countries. The second opening that SAARC provides to the member states is for unwinding themselves on the sidelines of SAARC without sacrificing any of their principles and yet coming out with a better frame of mind to concentrate on how best they can carry forward the SAARC agenda for economic cooperation. The SAARC summit could also work for confidence-building between India and Pakistan.

We see SAARC as a platform for reducing tension through a cooperative spirit but unfortunately it seems that hostility between India and Pakistan is taking its toll on the natural play of regionalism in South Asia. On behalf of the smaller nations of SAARC, we in Bangladesh urge all concerned in the regional organisation to make sure that SAARC summits are held on schedule as a matter of principle.

Put People before Self

The Congress has to re-articulate the issues which link people with livelihood and policies with principles. The party's future is dependent on the extent Sonia Gandhi makes her efforts towards that direction. Nijalingappa, the former Congress president, has summed up correctly in his posthumous autobiography that Congress Party cannot exist without support from the grassroots.

It was never a contest. Not even Jitendra Prasad, a Congress leader from Uttar Pradesh, ever imagined that he could defeat Sonia Gandhi. Her election to the party presidency was taken for granted. She is too tall for him. And once the State Chief Minister, the party Working Committee members and the MPs, beholden to her for their positions, came out in the open to support her, even the formality of a contest was over. The election does not in any way diminish the basic fallacy under which the party functions. It remains personally-oriented. It believes that the party's mainstay is the charisma of the Jawaharlal Nehru-Indira Gandhi dynasty. The illusion that the dynasty attracts electorate is ingrained in the Congress Party men. When even Prasad says that his fight was not against the 'family,' how can the party get out of the personality syndrome? True, the Nehru-Gandhi family does evoke some response. But this has been declining relentlessly.

Had the dynasty's name really mattered, the Congress would not have failed so badly in the last Lok Sabha election. In fact, at many places the party's victory was due to the incumbency factor. The performance of some state governments was nowhere near the people's expectations. They opted for the Congress. It was a negative vote, very little in favour of the dynasty. Acept Nehru, whose appeal still transcends the state borders and community affiliations, the other members of the dynasty do not sell much. Indira Gandhi started well but got lost in the thickets of autocratic rule and dynastic ambitions. Rajiv Gandhi turned out to be completely inept. Their assassination has rehabilitated them to some extent in the minds of people. But to invoke their names is not a dependable anchor for support.

It is a pity that Sonia touched the sympathy chords and harped on personal loss. She should realise that the edifice of a party cannot be built on tragedies which have already been beaten to pulp. Rajiv Gandhi won 420 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha in the wake of Indira Gandhi's murder. Rao became the Prime Minister when Rajiv Gandhi was killed in the midst of polling. But this cannot go on for ever. People want to look ahead, not backward.

What does the Congress mean today? Nothing but a party which has made even the parochial and jingoistic Bharatiya Janata Party nearly irreplacable. At best it is an alternative which the exasperated voters may choose out of desperation. Where are the ideals it professed? Strange, the party has not learnt any lesson from its mistakes. There is no humility. Most of its leaders behave as if

they are about to be sworn in any time.

It appears that the party's fixation is power. But one does not know what it will do with power if and when the party makes it. It takes no steps to correct itself. It has held camps in Nanore and Panchmar and has come up with some good sugges-

tioned the anti-Sonia coterie. The truth is that the Congress has itself become a Syndicate, a contemptuous word which Indira Gandhi used for the old-timers. The same faces have been in the forefront for years. Neither do they quit on their own, nor does Sonia think of pushing them into the background because they are

husband did not revive the Congress. They possessed it. In the process, they replaced the politics of principles and ideals with money and power. Public life has become completely divorced from public service ever since. Will she be able to restore what was once the ethos of the Congress?

Some who have left the party Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma and a few others could have made the difference if they had tried to ignite the spirit of commitment and dedication. But their target was Sonia, not the ills in the Congress. They have made the point that people in India would not accept a 'foreigner' as their Prime Minister. Probably Sonia also realises it because it is the BJP which has gained the most from such an apprehension. Let the controversy rest here. What the Congress should do now is to take up the cause of the people. Their problem is that they are getting marginalised day by day. The countryside, which was content with a pittance, is economically insecure. The ever-growing unemployment accentuates the problem more. The globalisation is driving them to the wall. The Congress, which initiated the process, should introspect whether the economic reforms can be reshaped to pro-

tect India from indiscriminate imports, which are subsidised in one form or the other in America and Europe.

The party should also realise that it cannot come to power on its own. It has to face the fact of coalition politics which will dominate the country for years to come. The BJP has understood it, but the Congress has not. Had Sonia appreciated it, she would have become the Prime Minister when the Vajpayee government fell and when Samajwadi Party leader, Mulayam Singh Yadav, was willing to accept her provided she accommodated the allies in her cabinet.

The late Sitaram Kesri, in fact, spilt things when he put his foot down on her party joining the Inder Gujral government. Even the names had been finalised. But Kesri thought he could become the Prime Minister and that the non-BJP parties would be forced to support him. Sonia, too, thought likewise. One hopes she has changed her views.

The Congress has to re-articulate the issues which link people with livelihood and policies with principles. The party's future is dependent on the extent Sonia Gandhi makes her efforts towards that direction. Nijalingappa, the former Congress president, has summed up correctly in his posthumous autobiography that Congress Party cannot exist without support from the grassroots. That will come if the party appreciates what Mahatma Gandhi preached: Put people before self.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

tions on how to rebuild the Congress. But they have stayed only in speeches or on paper. The party has to take up issues concerning the people. Values, principles or whatever names you give them, the party must fight for them. That was precisely the strength of the Congress, not the shadows it is chasing now.

Prasada is right when he says that his contest was meant to point out that the party is 'in the clutches of coteries and self-seekers.' The way in which the Congress leaders rushed to queue up before Sonia justifies his charges. But he himself is not above blame. He too has culti-

her strength. Her promise to give 'this generation' leadership roles may have gone down well with them. But how will she get rid of the Syndicate?

At one time it looked as if she will infuse objectivity and courage into the party men. But just as Indira Gandhi fell prey to a set of shallow, superficial and corrupt people after defeating the Syndicate, Sonia too has allowed the rootless and the undesirable to surround her. She should have given the country a new Congress of the Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri days.

Sonia's mother-in-law and her

Patching up the Breaches

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

The opposition leaders declared their renewed vow to unseat the government by any means. The people, in their words, no longer want to see Awami League in power... The government leaders have reiterated their firm conviction that come what may the present government will complete its full term and make over charge to the caretaker government three months ahead of the election.

The loud announcement of holding the next public meeting jointly at the Paltan Maidan on November 07, 2000 and subsequent abandoning of the programme would invariably be a pointer to the ultimate disintegration of the alliance.

Informed sources claim that Begum Zia's physical absence from the active scenario is significant in as much as that her reported indisposition has been viewed by some quarters as a sort of 'diplomatic illness'. Such views, in the present situation, may not be ruled out as unfounded.

And in spite of all the speculations around Begum Khaleda Zia it is likely that she is sick. We pray that she recovers fast to resume her crusade. It is, however, not certain how soon shall she be able to get rid of the mental pressure she has been sustaining due to a number of corruption cases against her in the court. Her appeal for excluding her from the Airbus purchase scandal awaits hearing in the High Court now. General Ershad, on the other hand, has been granted a week more to surrender to the lower court and thereafter his appeal in the Supreme Court for vacating the conviction judgement shall be heard. Golem Azam too shall have been obsessed with an ominous portent generated from the massive and ever-growing demand of the people to try him as a War Criminal by a tribunal. His withdrawal from the leadership of the party may therefore, be considered as an instant but crude trick to divert attention.

The eventual decision of the four-party alliance to commemorate seventh November with mass procession only had been a great relief for all, particularly for the present government. Their earlier decision to hold a meeting at the Paltan Maidan under any circumstance was indeed fraught with danger. Home Minister Mohammad Nasim was among the first ones to felicitate the leaders of the alliance for taking the most sensible decision. He congratulated them too for having played their due role at long last in the greater interest of the people. However, such an apparent retreat from an otherwise hard line of action on the part of the alliance must not, in the least, infatuate the administration.

Viewed objectively, the government should accept the changed situation as a providential gift. Concurrently, the people at large shall have heaved sighs of relief with the news that there would not be any hartal for the moment nor would there be any hard programme till the end of Ramadhan.

As decided earlier the four-party alliance observed 'National Solidarity Day' on November 07 through a joint procession starting from Muktangan on the eastern fringe of Bangladesh Secretariat. The procession ended up in a fiasco with the police preceded by a few bomb blasts when

the march was on. Police resorted to lathi charge and tear gas shelling to disperse the rowdy mob damaging public vehicles around Kakrail. In the course a number of 'hoodlums' was arrested to be proceeded against under Public Safety Act. It was immediately anticipated that as a mark of protest a hartal would be called. But the leaders commanded patience and announced a mass rally on November 23 instead. They declared their renewed vow to unseat the government by any means. The people, in their words, no longer want to see Awami League in power. They believe that the days of the government are numbered. It will topple or rather, will be toppled anytime from now.

If the opposition's is a wishful thinking that time will say but the

government leaders have reiterated their firm conviction that come what may the present government will complete its full term and make over charge to the caretaker government three months ahead of the election. Accordingly, we shall have the next general election sometime in October, 2001. The election commission has also announced its preparatory measures to commence right from now. Meantime, the draft new voters' list was also made public on October 26, 2000 which has created a lot of enthusiasm among the people, particularly the new voters on attaining eligibility.

Now let's have a look at the recent developments in the neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal. The left-front government of West Bengal had a big

tremor. The legendary Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of the province for about two and a quarter decades at a stretch has voluntarily stepped down on purely health grounds. His most trusted second in command, Deputy Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee has succeeded the octogenarian Jyoti Basu. However, Basu and Bhattacharjee can never be treated at par for, the former wields such a personality and stature which only topmost ranking politicians in the national level, both past and present, would match. Leading an absolutely honest life and having total commitment to the welfare of the people had been the most dynamic features of this most respected elderly politician. He has left a long and enviable list of success stories which the people of West Bengal will gratefully remember. We in Bangladesh will remember him in gratitude for the great role he played to facilitate signing of the historic Ganges water sharing treaty with India. His birth and rise to eminence commenced from our soil and perhaps, in his inner mind he felt a genuine urge to repay, in his own way, debt to his roots.

OPINION

For a Free and Fair General Election

Faruque Hasan

the very nose of the state power. Nowadays most of the miscreants are under the protection of different political parties. In the past the hooligans, acting as musclemen, were subservient to the political leadership of different political organizations. Gradually they have become aware of the efficacy and importance of their muscle power and started ignoring their mentors. Now these hooligans have themselves emerged as wielders of power over political leaders at different levels of the parties they belong to. They are now playing an active part in shaping their parties' policies and activities.

Political parties and miscreants have become indispensable for each other. Political identity gives miscreants, in practice, immunity to the laws of the land. In Bangladesh membership of a big political party puts a miscreant above the law. In this country, whatever may be written in the constitution, not everybody is equal in the eyes of law. Persons having political identity and wealth always get unjustifiable preferential treatment in the hands of law and order implementing forces. Enforcement of law depends on the sweet will of law enforcers, who in their turn are helpless in the hands of the people in power. We may call this state of prevailing situation as absolute anarchy. This situation is the creation of the past successive governments as well as the present government.

The next general elections will be held under a caretaker government. According to the constitutional provisions the caretaker government will be in power only for three months. It's a very short time for an authority to redress complete lawlessness, nabbing thousands of miscreants having political links, and put the law and order on its right track. If we really want to get any perceptible benefits from this sort of a government in this country, the tenure of an interim government should be extended at least up to six months.

The sole responsibility of the caretaker government is to ensure free and fair elections. Gigantic efforts will be needed on the part of the next caretaker government to bear and discharge this responsibility. Being an independent nation we cannot

not ask for holding, in this country, the general elections under the supervision of the United Nations. So we are to find out devices how to hold the coming General Election free and fair.

At least one month prior to the date of the elections, ten to fifteen thousand notorious criminals having political identity should be arrested and put into custody with minimum one-month detention order. The Special Powers Act and the Public Safety Act may be used for this purpose. If the already overcrowded prisons of the country cannot make room for 10-15 thousand new inmates, a few makeshift camps can be erected to accommodate these arrested criminals.

In Saudi Arabia and the USA there are one policeman for every 80 and 250 people respectively. In Germany, France and the UK one policeman is there for every 300 to 500 people. The police forces of those countries are well equipped and well trained. On the other hand, in Bangladesh we have one policeman for every 2400-2500 people.

Because of lack of necessary manpower in the country's law and order enforcing agencies, it becomes impossible for them to maintain law and order properly during election days. Either we substantially increase the number of police personnel and equip as well as train them properly, or we should hold general elections on consecutive two days or on two days with one-day break in between instead of on one day. In our neighboring country, India, general elections are held on several days. The country may be demarcated into two zones to hold elections on two days. Among the two election days voting will take place in one zone on a day. This step will ensure deployment of comparatively bigger number of police, army and BDR at each polling booth. Adequate number of police, army and BDR will greatly help keep peace and prevent adopting any unfair means at polling booths by aggressive supporters and pet musclemen of any political parties trying to win the elections.

If we let the muscle power and hooliganism influence the results of the coming general elections then the very essence of the caretaker government will get marred.

To the Editor ...

Responding to flood victims

Sir, Floods and cyclones are one of the few certainties in Bangladesh and so is belated response. consequent politicisation, misappropriation and bickering over relief supply. This year too we notice the same thing in South West and parts of North West Bangladesh. Here, I would like to share some of my views to all concerned including the high level of GoB and donor team who have visited the flood-affected areas and are in the process of drawing up rehabilitation plans.

What we miss each time is a serious effort in rethinking our mitigation approach to such occurrences. It seems we are still in the closed mindset of disaster mitigation rather than understanding fundamental issues of vulnerability and risk avoidance. The fact that so many people are poor and such natural disasters impoverish them further to far severe and undesirable long-term consequences seems to elude us every year. Definitely emergency feeding-medical services, rescue and shelter for the affected are important but if we consistently avoid the larger question we may never truly tide over the disasters that are a natural certainty.

We need to focus more intensely on people's livelihood opportunities and come up with resettlement plan not necessarily outside their habitation) of the disaster affected people. Disasters routinely increase landlessness, result in forced migration and displacement, and severely alter existing social arrangements that further impoverish the already vulnerable people. The results are well known-- migration to cities, unhealthy and sub-human living in slums and general debasement of human dignity in their search

for an alternative livelihood.

What we need to think about is focussing on livelihood reconstruction of affected people and not just short-term measures like relief. Allocating money for seeds may not ultimately help the affected people, nor will small loans that come at a time when consumption needs are pressing. Just like refugees and involuntary migrants, disaster affected people should be supported in complete livelihood reconstruction and thus reversing the inherent risks of vulnerable people in both physical (flood proofing, cyclone shelter) and socio-economic sense.

I urge the concerned authorities to consider such fundamental issues while drawing up rehabilitation plans for this year's flood victims. Otherwise, Bangladesh can never erase its name from the ignominious classification it has consistently enjoyed.

Syed Zahir Sadeque
Social Development Specialist
Int'l Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
Kathmandu, Nepal

Settle the November 7 political issue

Sir, Every year the politicians create chaos over the significance of November 7, and the citizens have to witness the bickering. For how many more years this *tamasha* will be performed by the so-called political leaders, who are utterly helpless and incapable in closing the issue once and for all?

There are too many political issues which have been kept pending, hampering the nation in the onward goal towards the quick development of the society. What is the benefit of this type of political stop-piling? Why we cannot dispose of problems

quickly? The message from the citizens and the voters is: politicians, set your own house in order, before sermonising others. Rule and discipline yourselves first. Without bona fide politicians, just political governance will remain a far cry, as we have witnessed during the last ten years.

There is no such situation as a 'honeymoon period' in politics; so we have to be less sensitive politically, which means political tolerance. Pulling the 'anti-national' trigger at the slightest alleged provocation by the opponents is not enough to create a situation to live and let live. Otherwise, a time might come when the question would arise why the citizens (non-politicians) should tolerate the politicians and their grey political activities.

A Citizen
Dhaka

In the name of special police drive

Sir, I fully agree with the front-page news item of The Daily Star dated 6 November 2000, asserting that in the name of special police drive some members of the police are just harassing the innocent public and holding them up for money.

The examples cited in the report are enough to indicate that so far no real culprit has been caught. Do the IG and the Commissioner, DMP set specific guidelines for such special drives, coordinate and supervise it or just let the junior officers do whatever they like to do? How many more examples of awful irresponsibility do we have to witness?

An Exasperated Citizen
Dhaka