

## Eschew the hartal path

Attend the winter session of parliament without ado

RESIDENT Badruddoza Chowdhury has summoned the winter session of parliament on January 31. Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdul Hamid had indicated at a press briefing earlier on that the AL was thinking of joining the parliament from its 'next session,' the winter session, that is. However, the field situation seems set on a negative trajectory if one takes into account the AL's agitation programme to be rounded off by a half-day hartal on January 9.

All of this is ostensibly planned to protest the fuel price hikes. But significantly, the AL acting chief Abdus Samad Azad has expressed the hope that 'a popular surge on the issue would leave the government with no other alternative but to call fresh elections.' The rejectionist approach persists. So, the hint is at taking a movement path apparently in orchestration with the likely return of Sheikh Hasina to Bangladesh on January 8 from her month-long trip to the USA and Great Britain.

There will be anything between 8 and 9 per cent increase in the cost of living index because of hikes in the prices of electricity, gas, water and petroleum products. This is too important an issue of public interest to be kept out of the parliament. Jatiya Sangsad is the place to question the justification of raising the fuel price domestically when the international price has actually gone down.

The AL stands to gain in public esteem by taking the issue to the parliament under the glare of TV cameras to reach a wider audience. Indeed, the opposition should join the winter session of parliament for the very cogent reason that three enormously important items of agenda are set to be addressed. Bills seeking to repeal the Public Safety Act and form an independent Human Right Commission are going to be tabled. Furthermore, standing committees on different ministries and other important house committees with opposition's representation in them are on the anvil.

The chief whip of Jatiya Sangsad is maintaining contact with the opposition at the behest of Speaker Jamiruddin Sarcar to persuade them to come to parliament. The speaker has assured 'impartiality in running the House' adding that he too will try to bring the opposition into parliament. But we think it's time an 'official communication' is made with the opposition. Let the nearly four-week-long prelude to the winter session be utilised by both sides to ensure full-house sittings of parliament.

## British PM Tony Blair's historic visit

A post-colonial Britain can play a significant role

BRITISH PM Tony Blair's visit was a short one but it has come at period of great historic transition. Ancient equations are dying and new ones being written with the roles of various players redesigned in the realities of post-September 11.

At this point of time, nothing is fully certain and developing countries like Bangladesh are uncomfortable because of that. The new US-led global coalition has gone beyond a war against its enemies and it might now aggressively define the management system of international inter-action. Many hope that in this new structure, Britain as the leading European nation and closest ally of the US may be able to present the case for a more compassionate strategy than one that exists now.

Meanwhile, Khaleda Zia has conveyed to Tony Blair the willingness of Bangladesh to commit troops to safety management efforts in Afghanistan. This is beyond the usual UN duties of force deployment and means playing a part in the overall reconstruction of Afghanistan. The coalition and its allies will have to prove that the intent of the Afghan war was pacification and for that reconstruction activities are critical.

However, the developing world including Bangladesh are reeling under the impact of the turmoil and its economy needs urgent support. The discussion between the two leaders has touched on the issue and one hopes that positive developments will be soon concretised and announced.

Clearly, the historical advantage now is with the West but it will have to play a role beyond the military to prove its legitimacy as leaders. That will be in eradicating poverty and greater space for economic equity and international traffic of trade and people. Few understand that role better than Britain given its past. As a colonial power, it primarily enriched itself. As a post-colonial power it can help the poorer part of the world stand up. The New Labor leader Tony Blair has a historic opportunity. One hopes he takes it.

# State of primary education: How to salvage it

MANZOOR AHMED

LESS than two percent of class V students in primary schools acquire the minimum required level of skills in reading, writing and arithmetic prescribed by the national curriculum authority, says Education Watch 2000 Report launched on 31 December. The second annual report of Education Watch, an initiative of NGOs and education researchers, titled *A Question of Quality: State of Primary Education in Bangladesh* was released in Dhaka. The report is based on a nation-wide sample survey of 2,509 children in 186 government, registered non-government and NGO-run primary level institutions.

Although overall performance of all children are poor, rural children's achievement is only one-third of the level of their urban counterparts. Children in NGO-run non-formal schools do six times better than children in formal primary schools. There seems to be no overall difference in achievement between boys and girls.

Poor performance of primary schools and how they short-change children is not news. The new findings are consistent with other evidences of student achievement we had in the past. All of them indicate that a large proportion of children at least two-thirds or more fails to come out from the primary school with basic literacy and numeracy and basic general knowledge. What is disappointing is that the status of students' learning achievement has not been showing positive movement in spite of various major development projects in primary education carried out over a decade

We have underway now the multifaceted Primary Education Development Project (PEDP) which has been in operation since 1998 and is expected to be completed in 2003. Its price tag is 750 million dollars, a large part coming as loans and grants from external donors. Its aim is improvement in the quality of primary education. Before this project, there was the General Education Project (GEP) in operation from 1992 to 1997, another large multi-donor project aimed at improving access, quality

and community. Continuing and increasing stipends for poor students is a positive move, but how these funds can be directly linked to quality improvement should be examined - perhaps by providing paper, pencil and books and special tutoring for children falling behind.

**At the community and local level:** Initiate local-level comprehensive planning (at the village, union and Upazila level) for primary education with acceptable quality for all children, involving in the process all concerned parties,

including NGOs, government and government-assisted institutions, parents, community leaders and the local government. The aim would be to identify and implement essential short-term and longer term quality improvement steps in all primary education institutions (government, NGO, madrassahs, and private) in the area. Ensuring that effective contact hours between students and teachers are increased would be one of the aims.

**At the district level:** Begin to change the excessively centralized and bureaucratic control of primary education by creating autonomous district education authorities as the pivotal entity for overall planning and management of primary and secondary education. The district authorities should manage educational resources provided by the

competencies in primary education, the curriculum and learning objectives, textbooks and other learning materials, giving in all of these the highest priority to acquiring core literacy and numeracy competencies by all students. The aim should be to devote the bulk of time and effort in the classroom to these basic skills. Defer introduction of English or make it optional until class IV, so that children and teachers have more time for mastery of reading and writing in Bangla and arithmetic.

**(b) Re-examine how effectiveness of teacher training and supervision can be improved;** take account of many relevant lessons from teacher training and supervision practices in non-formal primary education with a very particular focus on learning outcome. Teach-

**(a) Re-examine the list of 53**

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and management of primary education. A recent PEDP assessment undertaken for the government and the participating donors shows few signs of progress in respect of quality.

Access in primary education has improved. About 80 per cent of the children of primary school age are now enrolled in school. Gender gap in primary school enrolment has almost disappeared. One out of five children, however, is yet to cross the threshold of the schoolhouse. And one out of three children who are now enrolled still do not complete primary education.

A cause for greater distress and frustration is that the large majority of even those who complete five years in primary school are not able to learn the basic skills to make use of these in their life and to use these

what should be done when the next round of a major development project in primary education is undertaken.

A master-plan for quality improvement must focus on measures to overcome the major obstacles in more specific and targeted ways than attempted in the past.

**At the school level:** Attention is needed to a) allocation of resources on a per student basis and distribution of facilities to reach the more deprived and low achieving social groups;

b) how direct and indirect costs of schooling to poor families can be reduced; c) introducing performance standards of schools and teachers focusing on learning outcome; and d) enforcing these standards through stronger accountability of schools to parents

relevant portion. This is for decorum and decency.

However, the new Governor of Bangladesh Bank will always have the privilege to put his signature on the new notes, like his predecessors. The President of the country whose office has a portrait of the Father of the Nation has not visited his tomb at Tungipara although his predecessor did it. This is a protocol lapse. He visited the house of the acting President of AL breaking the protocol. Political analysts say that the visit had a lot of political contents but the President is supposed to be apolitical. How is that?

The Khatib of the Baitul Mukarram mosque made some highly objectionable remarks in the last Eid congregation, which was led by him. This very Khatib made objectionable remarks during the previous government. On both the occasions there was storm of protest. AL government sacked him. The present government reinstated him. The Khatib has been asked to explain his remarks and it is learnt that the Islamic Foundation is thinking to sack him again, according to newspaper reports. What happens to the Khatib remains to be seen. But the government in its wisdom

did not ask explanation from the senior officials before sending them home but has felt it necessary to call for explanation of the Khatib, who does not belong to any cadre service of the government. Where lies the rub?

The past prime minister Sheikh Hasina is now holidaying in the United States. From there, according to news agency report, she assured those freedom fighter officials who have lost their jobs, that if she comes to power she will reinstate them. When she was in office, one freedom fighter, namely, Kader Siddiqui had to leave AL because she would not listen to differing opinion. After Siddiqui left AL and floated his own party, her government revived a 23-year old case against Siddiqui. This case has now been decided in his favour. Another freedom fighter was denied his job although the High Court decided in his favour and Hasina's government preferred to file an appeal in the Appellate Division against High Court order. This freedom fighter is in some substance and is well-known. In view of this, can Sheikh Hasina's promise be taken seriously by any freedom fighter?

ers and their organizations should be persuaded to become an ally in this effort.

(c) Double the GNP share of public budgets for education to five per cent in the next five years and direct the new resources to quality improvement measures. This increase will bring public expenditure only to the average level of expenditure for developing countries.

The aim of Education Watch is to provide an independent assessment of basic education in the country by undertaking investigation of aspects of it and bring out an annual report. Preparation for publishing the 2001 report is underway. As an independent body of NGOs and researchers, coordinated by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE, an umbrella organization of education-related NGOs), Education Watch is a unique Bangladesh entity.

There is justified skepticism about the relevance of well-intentioned reform proposals and their prospects for success in the prevailing culture of partisan politics, which nurtures unlimited corruption and mismanagement. The essential condition for implementing reforms in education is to put the genie of partisan politics back in the bottle. The civil society, politicians and government leaders must work together and create an overwhelming public demand to make the education system a politics-free zone, an area protected from partisan politics for the sake of our children and the future of the nation.

Adapted from remarks by Dr. Manzoor Ahmed at the launch of the Education Watch 2000 Report on 31 December, 2001.

## OPINION

# End of small mindedness not in sight

SHAHABUDDIN AHMAD

ALL governments, in order to be effective and pro-people, have to undertake programmes and policies, which are generally conducive to the welfare of the people. Our political leaders, while talking philosophically for the welfare of the people, make high promises for bringing changes in the society. But unfortunately, when they are saddled in power they deviate from their promises. They only know the reason for such deviation. But the general public, not very mindful of their promises, continue their lives and living only to hear, when the time for election comes, a new set of promises through political manifestos.

The present government, which has a thumping majority in the parliament, had promised to take stern action against wrongdoers and Begum Khaleda Zia reflected this in the first speech she made in the month of October. She needs a word of appreciation for allowing police to round up an MP for his illegal activities. This is a good example. Sheikh Hasina, the former prime minister, did not, however, take such actions, which were

necessary for some of the MPs or their cohorts. She had to pay a price for it.

Both the prime ministers, past and present, in the name of cleansing administration have sacked government officials even without giving the right of self-defence, which is a primary right of any government official. This action has twin effect - first, it unnerves those who are already in service because they suffer from uncertainty; and secondly, it is injustice which a government, voted to power by the people, cannot do irrespective of the provisions of draconian executive powers which govern the conduct of government officials. Besides, this was not a part of the political manifesto of any of the political parties that contested the elections. This cannot be termed as a step for eradicating corruption. Even during the height of martial law, the then government of Pakistan did not fire any of the high officials without serving show cause notice on allegedly corrupt officials. This was also the policy practiced during the second martial law in Bangladesh. There is even an instance that when such a notice was served by mistake on one high official, that was

subsequently withdrawn. Government officials are also the citizens of this country. They, therefore, can have a political view but they must not be guided by that political view in discharge of their official functions, unless under duress or compulsion. In such cases also the need for asking explanation can not be ruled out.

It is learnt from newspaper sources that currency notes having the photograph of the Father of the Nation is no longer circulated by the Bangladesh Bank at the instance of the government. It is further learnt therefrom that new notes of Taka 500, 100 and 10 will be printed and designs etc. have been readied. There is no harm in printing new notes provided demand is there but if the existing quantity of notes can meet the demand of the market, there is no point in printing new notes which will cost the government exchequer, irrespective of whether the payment is made in cash or through book transfer. The bank notes having the photograph of the Father of the Nation should remain in circulation as long as stock lasts as mark of respect and so long the Constitution of Bangladesh is not amended to exclude the

relevant portion. This is for decorum and decency.

However, the new Governor of Bangladesh Bank will always have the privilege to put his signature on the new notes, like his predecessors. The President of the country whose office has a portrait of the Father of the Nation has not visited his tomb at Tungipara although his predecessor did it. This is a protocol lapse. He visited the house of the acting President of AL breaking the protocol. Political analysts say that the visit had a lot of political contents but the President is supposed to be apolitical. How is that?

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Another symptom, now gaining ground, is changing the existing names, foundation stones etc. of places and institutions. There is a move to change the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, formerly known as the PG Hospital. The name of A Hannan International Airport in Chittagong is likely to undergo change. The foundation stone of a bridge, which was laid in the Sylhet Division during the AL government, has already been changed. These few incidents are symptoms of utter intolerance and are neither part of 100-day programme announced by the Prime Minister nor these changes will take place without the knowledge of the government of the day. Is there any charisma in the name? If there were any, the Zia International Airport, which is named after late President Ziaur Rahman reputed to be an honest person, would not have been the den of all sorts of illegal activities and corruption.

Can't our leadership rise above such small mindedness and create a history for the posterity to emulate? Otherwise we will remain a nation of small men with small minds.

# Stop cricket, promote kabaddi

ASHFAQUE HUSSAIN

WHILE we are waiting to get bashed by the Pakistan cricket team, it would do well to ponder our over importance to this sports at the cost of many other priorities. This is indeed a national hobby that we can ill afford. In fact it's a reminder that the people who can afford to spend time pursuing this sports or sit in front of TV sets all the time are in charge of policy making promote this sports. Those not keen have

been thrown out of the decision making structure.

Does it sound too radical and too "mad"? Maybe the readers of The Daily Star are already angry at me for my words. But one should be brave enough to face the fact that we are a terribly poor nation and cricket is a terribly expensive game. Even as a spectator sports, it's rooted in the discriminatory notions of colonial culture.

To be a spectator, it requires a person to have a regular income, access to TV sets, capacity to work only when one wishes and enough

leisure to discuss cricket for days and days. Just watch a cricket fan and you will see what I mean. Aren't we deliberately creating a sports culture for the elite and nursing it at the expense of others who have no interest in it at all?

If one argues that it is for improving the general mental state of the people, I would say that this is the worst possible way to do it. Bangladesh has established a record of sorts by notching more defeats than it's almost possible in contemporary sports. To see the name of Bangladesh appear regu-

larly at the bottom of every list is deeply distressing and makes us question even more why everyone is forced to undergo this humiliation.

Kenya, whom Bangladesh defeated, is ahead of Bangladesh but has had little in terms of sponsorship and support. Kenya has shown what hard work and not state resources can do. But while our cricket players have become famous and rich they have hardly performed. In view of the fact that they are paid by the government, they are accountable to the people. They are salaried servants of the

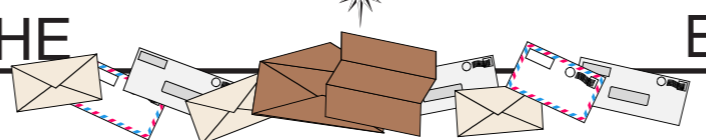
state and like all others should have regular supervision. If an officer of the republic behaved the way they did or do, they would have been transferred or least made an OSD.

Our cricket shenanigans are increasingly looking like a major indulgence sports for a small group of people. It's obviously for the leisured class and that's why those who wield power can continue this discarding other priorities can continue this. I see no reason to invest money in a group of people who can't deliver. Just because we have become used to low perfor-

mance in other sectors, we are willing to put up with this kind of output. Cricket belongs to the TV class but they aren't in the majority. On top of it all, it just continues to make us feel bad. I think it's very unfair to pay out of our pocket to be humiliated.

Best would be to consider an alternative sports like kabaddi which has wider appeal and can be played on any patch of mud. We should promote it internationally. Much better to be a king in one's own backyard than a slave in somebody else's camp.

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



## Questions to Faezul Huq

Thank you Mr Faezul Huq for your quick response. After reading your letter I sat down to write an apology letter, but some issues are still disturbing me. Some issues propped up in my mind after reading your letter. Because in some incidents that you have mentioned in brief there is a beginning but no ending and in some cases, there is ending but no beginning. Would you meet my following queries so that I can write my apology letter properly and accurately?

1. Did not you contest in 1970 election? Did you win in that election?
2. Did you participate in the Liberation War as a freedom fighter?
3. Being an (the then) Awami League leader, why didn't you join the Mujibnagar but rather 'tried to contact every one at Mujibnagar'? Why an AL leader would require some media to contact with 'every one in Mujibnagar'?
4. On 20th December 1971,

when the entire country became free, why did you require protective arrest?

5. In 1971 many people of this country incurred losses of their property and asset. Their assets were looted and burnt. Why your loss occurred after one year-- in 1972? Of course many people also lost their property in 1972 such as the Biharis.

6. If nothing could be proved against you in 1972 why were you detained for more than six months? Why did you require two British MP's recommendation in order to get released? Why did the head of the state (Sheikh Mujib) have to interfere to release you? Why were you not released in normal course of law?

7. If your movement was restricted in Dhaka, how could you go to Lyaipur in 1971?

8. When did you come back from Lyaipur? Were you a free man at that time?

9. You said you were arrested in 1.4.1971. When were you freed? How could Pakistan Army free an

Awami League leader alive? If you were not freed, then how could Pakistan Army allow you to meet British MP and 'explain everything keeping interest of Bangladesh intact'? When were you under arrest?

8. You seems to be happy at the arrest of your rival (who became your colleague in 1996-2000 cabinet) in mid-70s. Every Awami League leader feels proud and heroic for being arrested after 1975 incident, why did you think that (imprisonment) as a punishment?

9. You said you were a victim of circumstances. Which 'circumstances' are you referring to? What do you mean by 'victim'? How did you become a victim? Who victimised you?

10. Saidduzzaman Rawshan in his book "Statement and speech of Ghatlak Dalal of 1971" wrote that 'Faezul Huq roamed around the whole country during the 9 months of Liberation War to mobilise support in favour of genocide of Pakistani Army. On 11th April 1971 he gave statement 'Those who have not yet joined their workplace due to

some reason or due to some illusion, I would say to them, time is passing very fast, if we would come to the right track, then every minute has it's own value. The way we have faced an open attack of India two years back, the same way, unitedly, in a body, we have to be prepared to face their open attack now'. Is this statement true or false? Did you sue r Saidduzzaman Rawshan?

**Shawkat Hossain**  
*Lalmatia, Dhaka*

**On hijab**  
Recently a lot has been discussed regarding the issue of Hijab.

Fine, you can leave it to a sister to choose whether she wants to observe hijab or not.

But let me make the following things clear:

Simply to use the word Hijab when referring to the covering of a sister-in-Islam is to recognise the word in the Quran and thereby recognise that the wearing of Hijab has been commanded in the Book reverse.

The meaning of Hijab has been outlined in the Quran and further

been substantiated by authentic Hadith which is not disputed by anyone of religious authority. This is therefore a clear-cut issue. Do not wear Hijab if you wish-- but at least recognise what our Faith prescribes in this regard.

There is no basis for saying that the Quran is specific to Arab nations and that we should only draw parallels from it. That is a highly mistaken view-- the Messenger (PBH) came for all mankind.

I feel more comfortable with sisters who are not able to wear Hijab but recognise the requirement-- for we all fall short of what we should do and we should seek to work on all these issues. However, you cannot say you are a Muslim and then opt to choose which bits of Islam we accept.

In the West where I live-- you see many sisters voluntarily wearing Hijab. And if you speak to them-- they do not feel repressed at all. In fact they are far more independent than most women in our Asian countries are-- they know more about Islam than many people and

they are strong confidant people. I think we should seek to move away from the programming of western people that has taken over our home nations.

**Star bhai**  
*USA*

## Textile and RMG sectors

The BTMA is putting up many imaginative arguments to prevent the implementation of the SAARC Cumulation. To a disinterested outsider it would seem that this association is fearful of maintaining its inflated profit margins if SAARC Cumulation comes through even though they get a 25 per cent cash incentive from the government and sell their fabric at another 25 per cent higher price than the international market.

You also quote the BTMA Chairman as saying that it is difficult to add 51 per cent value to the imported fabric. Actually SAARC Cumulation requires 51 per cent value addition on the final exported products total value. Therefore the

only viable option would be to import the fabric and dye and finish in Bangladesh. The other items of value addition, accessories, cutting and making and washing are already being done locally.

The beneficiaries of this would be the RMG units and their associated industries like washing and accessories and the dyeing and finishing plants. The BTMA would have to put its act together and start making competitive fabrics and actually put the 25 per cent cash incentive to good use.

But we can rest assured the perennial bogyman of Bangladeshi discourse, India, is soon to be invoked which would make any governments acquiescence to the SAARC Cumulation tantamount to selling out to India. That is usually good enough to put an end to any intelligent debate.

**MA, one-mail**

## "Pakistan and Islam!"

This letter is in response to Ms. Nadiya's response to Mr. Khalid's letter about Taj Mahal being spared by Pakistan as a Muslim Emperor

built it.

I was particularly incensed by Ms. Nadiya's negative stand towards the Pakistanis.

Ms. Nadiya and Mr. Khalid are talking about different group of Pakistanis, in fact may be a different generation of Pakistanis.

Let me put it like this, is it the same Indians blocking water at Farakka Barrage, who helped us achieve independence? Or for that matter, does Ms. Shabnam Nadiya belong to the same Bengalis who captured, exploited and raped many tribal people, forcing them, in part, to rebellion? This kind of blind hatred and blanket condemnation leads to no good and should be left to narrow-minded politicians who exploit the emotions of unsuspecting, suppressed and frustrated people in search of scapegoats, not educated and conscious people like Ms. Nadiya. Such rhetoric is the brewing pot for meaningless conflicts.

Hope I made my point clear. So how many of you now think, I am a traitor or a Razakar? Zobia E. Anam, on e-mail