

'Education for all' --let us mean it

MORSHED ALI KHAN

"EDUCATION for all". The slogan was perfect on the occasion of the Global Education Week that concluded with a rally organised jointly by Oxfam and the Coalition for the Urban Poor on Sunday. Customarily a group of children formed a human chain and demanded that the world, particularly the more fortunate part of it, unite to extend education for all living and sharing the resources of this planet.

The shocking news at the rally was that throughout the world 125 million people do not have access to formal education of any sort whatsoever. If we have to accept this figure that means that 125 million children are growing up on this planet to live with the fortunate ones without knowing how to read, write or sometimes comprehend what the rest are trying to say.

More shocking news was handy. In Bangladesh 21 percent of the children are deprived of education. These 21 percent, obviously numbering in millions, are growing up to join a mammoth group of 45 million illiterate persons already existing in the country. Within a short period the country is destined to produce more day labourers, rickshaw pullers, street vendors and a mass of unskilled employment-seeking males and females. It looks even grimmer if we try to look at the law and order situation. A hungry stomach thinks little. With millions living around us with the curse of illiteracy and an induced plight of hunger, the world would definitely look less rosy for the fortunate ones as well.

Two years ago, representatives

of 180 governments, UNESCO and the World Bank gathered in Dakar under the banner of the World Education Forum. There, all unanimously committed to deliver education for all by the year 2015. They agreed in principal that 'no country seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievements of this goal by lack of resources'. The reality that followed the verbosity in Dakar has indeed

been less encouraging for the poor countries desperately trying to brush off the misfortune. According to a press release, issued on the occasion of the Education Now Campaign: Week of Action, the World Bank estimates that Bangladesh will need an additional US \$ 39 million per year of external financing of basic education. This calculation will only meet the absolute minimum requirements not

taking into consideration the full cost of improved quality, equity and access.

On the part of the government here there are lots more to do to chalk out an effective national education plan within the year 2002. 'Education for all' ---let us mean it.

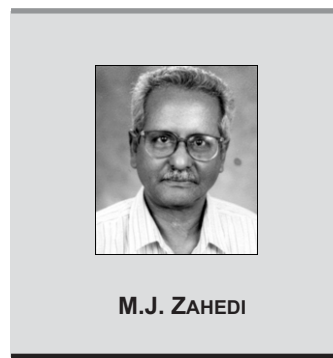
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Human chain on the occasion of the Global Education Week

PHOTO: STAR

Pleas for 'yes' vote



M.J. ZAHEDI

VOTING to elect a president of Pakistan for five years, from October, begins today (Tuesday). It should not be called an election as there is only one candidate, and he is the ruling President General Pervez Musharraf. Campaigning that was launched by Musharraf from Lahore on April 9 has ended. People will cast their votes throughout the country on today (April 30). During the last days of the campaigning, spread over all the four regions of the country, it focused on substantive and real issues. Instead of trying to find loopholes in the opponents' (mainly the Pakistan People's Party, the Pakistan Muslim League and the Jamaat Islami) ranks, Musharraf has been making a strong case for an 'yes' vote by highlighting the achievements of his government during the last two and a half years. He has been trying to convince his listeners of his sincere desire to do more for them in case he gets a positive response from them. At every meeting, he has spoken at length on what his government has done for the people of that province and what he intends to do in future.

For example, in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province, he enumerated various steps that the

military regime has taken in the past two and a half years to revive and accelerate work on a number of uplift projects in Balochistan that is the largest but the least populated (only five per cent of the country's total population) province of the country. One reason for the province has remained underdeveloped is the nature of the allocation of funds by National Finance Commission, which is done on the basis of population. The province gets only a meagre amount from the

governments. The province is endowed with extensive natural resources, like fertile land, gas and oil reserves and coal deposits. Unfortunately these resources have not been exploited to their maximum; as a result, these have brought little benefit to the poor people of Sindh. But Musharraf held out strong assurance to the people of Sindh that a number of mega projects would be initiated in the province to break the vicious circle of backwardness and underdevelop-

ment. One noticeable feature of the campaign was that the crowds in the rallies swelled with each passing day.

The President based his plea on two main arguments: one, his success in the April 30 polls would ensure the continuity of the reform package initiated by his government and two, since October 1999 he has provided a clean and competent government. Both these arguments seem to have made a positive impact in the listener, because it is an undeniable fact that some of the steps taken by the military government are such that no civilian government could dare touch them. For example, the question of electorate. Under the eighth amendment (of the country's

LETTER FROM KARACHI

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Constitution), the late General Zia-ul-Huq had replaced joint electorate with separate electorate, although the minority population of the country had opposed separate electorate. The then political parties in opposition also opposed separate electorate, but did nothing when they came into power. PML is openly opposed to joint electorate. Similarly, the women of the country are happy with Musharraf, as he has expanded their representation in the elective bodies; it had long eluded the activists for women empowerment.

The government also won acclaim when it banned the sectarian and terrorist organisations. These organisations had raised their heads under civilian democratic regimes, which due to their political exigencies were not in a position to act against them. The people seem to be convinced that the military government was a better economic manager. Under the latter there was no check to expenditure, the fiscal deficit continued to grow, which the military government succeeded in stemming. Not only this, it brought about a much-needed turn around by achieving improvements at macro level. The newly introduced system of district government has already created its impact on the common man who are getting their problems solved at local levels, a facility they are experiencing for the first time in the last fifty plus years of Pakistan.

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State of IT: A market roundabout

A MAWAZ

I visited the so-called Computer City at IDB Building Agargaon Dhaka several times. After a long gap I visited it recently, and am not impressed. While the venture is laudable, I reckon this a teething phase, and the varieties of services would improve in the future. Merely selling new products is not enough. The after-sale service should be stronger than new product sales, for keeping the captured customers happy for ten years or so.

Imitating Singapore is not easy and simple; the infrastructure has to be built up diligently, and it takes time, considering the limitation of consumer spending in a peaked society where the middle class has practically no purchasing power, and money laundering is in vogue (the notorious purchasing power of easy, short-cut income). I do not question the motivation of the sellers, who are welcome as entrepreneurs. The government is too slow in encouraging the local computer market, as the Secretariat is not technically oriented, depending

on the time-consuming noting system in files on its endless trips round and round.

I have been using computers for about 20 years, since before the clone IBM PC captured the market, and cheaper home PCs became popular. The GoB had been rather late acting as a facilitator; but it is encouraging to find that the Ministry of Science has been revamped to include "ICT", a new term signifying information and communication technology. The confusing part is that "communication" includes transport (there is the Ministry of Communications). There are Ministries of Transport in other countries).

My bankers, a small branch of the Janata Bank (SOE), is fitting computers at its branch offices for the last several months, but I am told that the actual computerised operational service will take many more months, due to bugs and testing, and fine tuning the system. I recall my posting in Islamabad-Rawalpindi during the late 1960s, when I used to get a copy of my computerised pay slip every month from a government bank in

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Rawalpindi 35 years earlier! The new IT Park in Kaliakoir is welcome in the year 2002.

It is hoped that the relevant IT Ministry would be staffed by trained and experienced technocrats and consultants to open the IT highway to the middle class and SMEs at reasonable service charges. What is the position now? Five years waiting list for a new telephone connection, and that too at the highest installation charges in the world, in a poor under-developed country like Bangladesh!

The government-controlled BC Society has to be revamped, with consultants provided by the UN/ITU during the initial planning period for establishing the national network, including computerisation of the government offices (not sporadic

gestures like the manpower office).

The stranglehold of the Windows Operating System is so severe in the third world that I was surprised when the Cyber Cafe in my locality could not send an e-mail of a document given to them on a floppy in text form. I went with the diskette to another operator, who took four days to send it (after compressing it, I was told), after calling in their in-house expert.

It reveals that the basic training and grounding of the thousands of computer operators is suspect. Who will probe it and recast the syllabus? The trainers have to be trained in the historical context; but weak working knowledge of English is a great weakness in the present generation of youth attracted to computers. We need "crash

programmes" (not programmes and data crashing inside the computer due to virus).

Another example: I returned an edited document to one firm on a diskette in text form (ASC), but the office computer operator could not transfer the file to Windows for further processing (I could do it when I sat down beside the operator in their office). The agency sent me further draft documents on their floppy for editing. I asked for text format, but it was in windows version (I tried Windows for several years, then went back to DOS; it would take too long to explain the technical reasons here). Further it was a bad diskette; and all the data could not be retrieved on my PC as the diskette had many bad sectors, as checked with NDD and Diskfix).

Scandisk was not done before and after use of the diskette, as is the normal practice. I demonstrated in their office some periodical maintenance schedules, but later it was not followed. This indifference may be due to poor training, lacking motivation. High-tech electronic equipment need trained maintenance; common sense is not enough.

One more example of the poor local market: technology is changing fast, but there is no trade-in or secondhand market in Dhaka (like that of used cars) for upgrade sell the old and buy new or another secondhand set (car or pc). However the HP system introduced by the banks is welcome.

The electric and electronic retail shops are staffed by non-technical

personnel. This trend is quite common: visit the Stadium or Baitul Mokarram electronic market and see all brands of electronic household goods are sold without any service-backing from the manufacturers of the famous name brands even those who have authorised service centres in Dhaka, as the direct importers apparently do not contact the local agents (not all of them). A capital equipment cannot be sold like a consumer product.

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One electrical shop told me I ask too many technical questions, and then do not buy, hence I was not welcome! Autocratic salesmanship (take it or leave it), I would assert, as a knowledgeable shopper, consumer, user. The shopper is taken to be a novice by the salesmen, and they flood the buyer with irrelevant

opinions and adjectives, without giving information and data; and contradicting the buyer on each point (this argumentative tendency, as in politics). It prevails in the market in all sectors, including the kitchen markets. The reasons are understandable, but the associations have to pay attention to customer service. The CAB is rather passive with long-term projects. They should start sales classes.

Back to PCs. I am a collector of branded softwares, and have an archive built up in decades. I cannot talk about it to anyone, all are interested in the latest versions of new products with high power, more goodies, and needing more and more funds. The PC sector cannot be treated as a consumer market. It needs a base (the 2-stroke engine autorickshaws established a base, which is now being abolished an exercise started too late).

The purpose of this commentary is to create an awareness in the right professional circles for the right foundation, and the right structures for public service.