LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY JULY 17, 2003

SSC exam results

A big pointer to educational crisis

HE pass figure for this year's Secondary School Certificate examinations is a jarring 36.85%. The poor rate of success is ascribable to precautionary measures taken against possible cheating attempts by candidates at different exam centres. Also, no grace marks were given to make things look better. Last year, it was 40.66%, in percentage point around 4 only compared to this year's devastating pass rate.

So, in spite of the slight variation in the results from year to year, the level of failure at the most widely taken public examinations happens to be around 60 per cent. What a mirror-image of national waste that is! In how many forms are we losing out? We are wasting in terms of time, money and human resources. A poverty-stricken country like us can ill-afford such a huge wastes. To top it off, the generations of failed students from one set of public examinations to another are exerting tremendous pressure on the already heavily burdened education system.

We are heartened by the fact that a total of 1392 students obtained highest Grade Point Average (GPA) or A+ in this year's examinations as against only 330 last year. We congratulate the high achievers, although it needs to be mentioned that for the last two years in a row girl candidates have not fared all that better at the top compared with the boys. But to our mind what is primarily a matter of analysis is the massive failure rate because that affects our human resource development programme most intensely and extensively.

The candidates from the outlying schools have generally fared deplorably which brought down the average pass figure. Most observers see a combination of reasons behind the lackadaisical mufassil performances: mushrooming of schools on political consideration; sending up of students who failed at the qualifying tests in response to pressure from management committee members or locally influential people; poor classroom instructions; negligence on the part of both the teacher and the taught; and dearth of educational equipment and tools. One common inadequacy amongst schools has been the paucity of qualified English and Mathematics teachers.

Exam results are the ultimate manifestation of how good an education system is. This is truism in that in spite of the modifications of the exam formats we have not been able to stem the educational wastes. So, the bottom line is we reform the education system, free it from clutches of politics and make the teaching profession attractive.

Ensure quality of river crafts

A methodical approach needed

HE shipping ministry has apparently woken up from Rip Van Winkle's long slumber. It is now energetically trying to come to grips with the problems brought to the fore by the launch disaster on

To begin with, it has identified 57 launches as 'risky and unfit". The identification follows categorisation of 2,100 river vessels done in April after a series of launch mishaps. So, there has been an inexplicable loss of time between categorisation of the vessels and identification of some of them as unfit. The ministry has also initiated an investigation into how those unfit and risky vessels managed to get the licence to operate in the first place. Curiously, the ministry has raised a question that ought to be self-directed. After all, the navigational licences could not have been issued by any outsider. So, the most important job was not done and we have witnessed what a price people had to pay

Now, we would suggest a three-pronged strategy to bring back order in inland navigation. First, the vessels marked unfit and risky in the irreparable sense will have to be ordered out of business. Second, the vessels that need repairing and modernisation should be sent to dockyards immediately and they must not be allowed to ply until they attain river worthiness under certification by experts. Third, it is a good idea that launch-building will henceforth be under direct supervision of the shipping ministry in the sense that launches will have to be built on designs given by the ministry. The ministry should use the services of the experts from the naval architecture department of BUET and ensure that no violation of rules takes place

Finally, alongside making efforts to enforce the rules and regulations investigation must also be made into the allegation that some of the vessels plying the most turbulent rivers have a "flattened draft" which help them negotiate shoals and shallow water in some parts of the rivers. But such a draft can be a source of great danger when a launch is plying along deep

The ladies with the lamps



ABDUL BAYES

was about eleven in the morning when I reached Shibpur village under Pirgonj upazila of Thakurgaon district. only aim was to meet some female farmers who were reported to be recently trained on agricultural production practices by the Poverty Elimination through Rice Research Assistance (PETRRA) project under the aegis of International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the Department of Funds for International Development (DFID). The sponsors call it Integrated Crop Management (ICM) training and, intentionally, imparted it to the 'resource poor' females so that they could add some value to the process of production of their households. *En passant*, in the context of Bangladesh, female farmers mostly go to mean those involved in post harvest activities at the household levels. I also had that notion in my mind and hence, mentally prepared myself to throw some questions on that score. However, while waiting in front of the house of poor Urubala, I sensed that all whispers were hovering around one Khuku Moni (35) who was yet to appear before us. I reckoned that she must have been the leader of the ladies in the group of ten formed by the Rongpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS) -- an NGO and a longtime friend of the poor in that region. Mentionably, RDRS is a partner of the PETRRA project.

Females in fields

"Where is Khuku Moni?" -- I asked the resource poor female farmers who had courteously came to see She is in the paddy field planting *aman* crop as a wage labour" -- I was told. Soon she arrived with a smiling face and informed me that, in addition to working in her own plots (with husband), she also works on others' land as daily wage labour. The wage rate is Tk. 40 plus a meal. Reportedly, she works for 4 to 5 months as agricultural wage labour starting from planting to harvest-ing. In fact, Khuku Moni has no other option but work hard both inside and outside house as she is forced to feed a family of seven. She can only sign her name and her household owns 50 decimals of

some land to raise farm output. And as I was told, this applies to half of the group members that Khuku Moni seemingly leads to move up the economic ladder.

Powerful knowledge

Knowledge is power but, perhaps, all knowledge are not equally powerful as far as earning butter and bread is concerned. The female farmers that I was faced with have been trained for few days and then were left to upgrade themselves. Every month, they gather to gain additional insights on farm practices through a participatory path. They discuss their

PETRRA-RDRS" -- the female farmers narrated to me in the same

Penny to the rich, pound to the poor

Khuku Moni came to quantify some of the benefits of the ICM training. The gains might sound a penny to the rich but appears as a oound to the poor like the "ladies with the lamps" that I met in Shibpur village of Pirgonj. Just two years back, Khuku Moni used to grow boro paddy by borrowing money from village 'mahajans'. Since modern varieties of rice need only confirmed the contentions of

The poor and paddy

Urubala's son was also sitting there. He told me that her mother regularly conveyed the tone of the training to him. " My mother cannot keep in mind everything all the time. So I come to her help through implementation of her wishes" Urubal's son submitted. He informed me that in his 3-bigha plot (90 decimals), he got 45 maunds of paddy this year just because of systematic and cost saving farm practices. In the past, the same amount of land brought

fed and clothed better than in the past" -- Khuku Moni continued to confirm her comfortable present conditions. Urubala's son joined in the joy with the news that his family can now meet whole year's food need plus save Tk.2000-4000 by

selling the surplus. The spillover effects of their training were also on the discourse. Some villagers already requested for BRRI dhan 31, 30. Their relatives from far and wide have become fond of their farm prac-tices. The most important spillover effect has been in terms of growing additional crop, growing

'dhancha' or 'mug dal' immedi-

From Shibpur, I went to Uttar

Shibpur that lies few kilometers

from Shibpur. There I met seven

female farmers. The utterances

and the upshots were almost the

same. Per acre vield increased by a

big margin due to the development

of ideas on cropping pattern, new

varieties, seed management at household levels, water and fertil-

izer application etc. Asiran Begum

(55) said: " In the past, we needed

three liters of diesel for watering one bigha of land. Now, 2 liters. By

adopting canal and pipe system in

irrigation, we have saved water and

hence diesel cost by Tk. 22 per

bigha. This meagre amount mat-

ters most for us". The participants

reported that, over the years, they

improved upon their housing,

children's education and clothing,

health etc. They are now able to eat

ately after the harvests of wheat.

Rose smells the same

board: "Ashe pasher manosh bole hamrao bichon nebo (neighbours say we shall also take the seed)".

Costly credit!

During the discourse in both the villages, I wanted to know whether they would prefer (a) Tk. 10,000 credit at 15 per cent interest rate or (b) a ten-day training on such types of activities or (c) both. Surprisingly, out of the 17 female farmers from both the villages, 10 opted for (b), two for (a) and five for (c). The proponents of (b) held that their option was not repavable but, at the same time, riskless and rewarding. The other two options were repayable at a certain date, risky and in case of an odd situation, could even turn out to be unrewarding. The supporters of (c), on the other hand, argued that knowledge without implementation is useless and the only way to implement ideas of this kind is possible through credit to the poor. The difference between a rich and a poor farmer -- so they argued -- is the difference in terms of resource availability during the *boro* cultivation period. The former fawns upon own sources while the latter, on costly credit.

Ladies lit lamps

As I drove back, I found females planting aman seedlings in muddy fields under the scorching heat. It was surprising to see that the resource poor females along with their male counterparts were sweating under the sun for a sustainable livelihood through upgrading their skills and expanding their frontier of knowledge. My hats off to the "informal profes sors" that I met in those two villages. I am told that a lot of such ladies are being trained in several places on agricultural practices. et ladies like them carry the lamps all over Bangladesh. To this effect, what they need is new knowledge, newideas and new technology.

Epilogue

"What would you expect from your politicians?" -- I asked the female farmers. Some of them talked about training, some about education and some about housing and health etc. But sitting at the corner was sweet and shy Shanaz (19) who expected stoppage of hartal. I was taken aback by the answer and asked : " Why? How come you are affected by hartal living in a remote village of Pirgonj?" Shanaz covered her smiling face with her saree amidst laughter from others. An old lady later explained to me that due to the last hartal, her newly married groom could not come from Chittagong.

"Necessity is the mother of invention" -- İ uttered in my mind. It is true for Shanaz, for the females that I met and perhaps for all of us.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

It was surprising to see that the resource poor females along with their male counterparts were sweating under the sun for a sustainable livelihood through upgrading their skills and expanding their frontier of knowledge...l am told that a lot of such ladies are being trained in several places on agricultural practices. Let ladies like them carry the lamps all over Bangladesh.

problems, try to find out solutions and in the event of a failure, seek suggestions from RDRS.

"What have you learnt about farming?" -- I posed to the resource poor participants after explaining to them the purpose of my visit. " We learnt a lot. First, traditionally for ages, we used to grow only two crops in *aman* and *boro* seasons. In between, the lands were kept fallow. Now, we grow three crops with mustard in the middle. Second, we now use one or two seedlings -- compared to five or more before -- to see that output is not affected at all. We had the wrong idea that more seedlings mean more output. That means, more lands are now being covered with the same amount of seedlings. It saves cost. Third, we did not know that growing "dhancha" gives green fertilizer. We do it now and save huge cost on urea. Fourth, we cultivate "mug dal" as additional crop to help raise fertility of the land. Fifth, there are 41 varieties of paddy in our country but we heard of two or three and they too are low yielding. BRRI dhan 29, 39, 33 are high yielding but were beyond our imagination. Sixth, we used to waste a lot of irrigation water through sippage. Now, we know how to water the fields through canals to save water. Recently, we have been using pipes to save more water. Seventh, we used to grow vegetables just to meet household needs. But the training on ICM showed how to reap home better harvests, especially high yielding potatoes. Vegetables are now grown for commercial purposes also. And the last but not the least. we have been trained on seed

fertilizer, water and involve other costs which amount to a sizeable margin, it was not possible for her poor household to meet the cash requirement from own source. Therefore, in boro season, her household had to borrow, say, Tk. 2500 or so to be paid in 90 days. The principal and the interest rate amount thereupon totaled Tk. 3750! Gone are those days. She now cultivates an additional crop, Mustard, in between *aman* and boro instead of keeping the land fallow. Last season, she cropped mustard in 9 decimals of land and reaped home 2.5 maunds of output valued at Tk. 1800-2000. " mustard is not that much water and fertilizer intensive crop. So, by growing and selling it, I have been feeding resources for the boro crop. Now-adays I do not need the money from 'mahajans' at an exorbitant rate of -- a proud and prized Moni told me. Her "comrades"

forth only 27 maunds. As I could understand, for every resource poor in the village, paddy output more than doubled per unit of land. In other words, their land endowments also doubled in one sense. In a regime of pervasive poverty, such a rise in rice output is really remarkable. Thanks to two

'Ts': technology and training. Khuku Moni, Urubala, Kironbala, Josna, Shefali and others who gathered before me also depicted their developments on food security. " I always faced food deficit of six months or so. That meant either I had to borrow money to buy rice or borrow rice to pay at a later time. In any sense, it was not dignifying. Now I know, how to get good crops in a cost effective manner. Costs are saved and at the same time outputs are raised. I now have little surplus to sell in the market. The sons and daughters are in schools. They are

> more than before. Some of them also bought land or released the earlier mortgaged land. **Correlation and causation**

"But that could be due to factors other than the training on crop management that you mentioned -- I invoked. " It is true that we got credit from RDRS to buy bullocks, poultry birds, set up grocery shops etc. But you see, we now get 20 maunds of paddy per bigha compared to 13-14 maunds in the past. It is mainly due to our hitherto unknown new varieties. We now grow additional crops to raise income. That is the product of our gained knowledge that we hardly had before. So, we reckon that income from growing crops increased and hence we would put ICM training at the top." spillover effect was brought on

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Some cheers for SAARC

growing, preservation and seed-

beds. All these experiences we

gained through training from



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INALLY, decks have been cleared for holding the next summit of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the development has come as something to cheer about for the regional forum which is weathering many a storm since its incep tion eighteen years ago. The meet ing of the SAARC standing committee comprising the foreign secre-taries in Kathmandu has been remarkably noteworthy in the sense that it has succeeded in removing the uncertainty that persisted on the next conference of the heads of government of the seven member states. The event hung in the balance for a pretty long time as it was scheduled to take place in January this year, but no indications were available since late last year whether the conference would at all be taking place in

No doubt, the summit of the member states occupies an important segment of the entire SAARC activities. There the leaders not

sions but also provide the much desired political push to the forum required organisation that often lands in the slippery ground. The last summit in Kathmandu itself took place after a long gap only after obstacles were eliminated following assiduously carried out endeavours. No wonder, the inordinate delay was due to the rivalry and difference of the two major players of the regional spectrum -- India and Pakistan. -- And once again such problems between the two traditionally hostile neighbours were nothing surprising. Nonetheless,

quently the summits have often been a victim of this unfortunate

True, differences among other member nations too have also contributed to delaying the summits or other programmes but essentially it has been the Indo-Pak bilateral problems that were largely responsible for summits not taking place at the scheduled time. The last summit in the capital of Kathmandu was made possible only after some improvement in it was decided that the 12th conference of the heads of the governthe wait was agonising but finally good news came from the capital of Nepal that the summit now would ike place from January next year in Pakistan.

Obviously, the issue was cleared by the political leadership at the highest level before the foreign secretaries formally took the decision. Indeed, the leaders have demonstrated their sagacity by not subjecting the SAARC heads of government conference to further delay. However, it needs to be pointed out that this delay could have been shortened let alone that the summit should not have been delayed at all. While welcoming the

track of forging cooperation among the seven densely populated developing and least develregion has more than one fifth of world's total population.

It is a matter of common knowledge that SAARC suffers badly from resource constraint and this prevents the enterprise from taking much welfare-oriented programmes that would benefit the vast multitude living in the impoverished region. Sceptics say that SAARC is somehow limping and is not making the expected progress. Given the resource constraints and vexed political differArguably, the political problems which are so acute between the two

members cannot under the carpet just for the sake of the SAARC and it is likely to cast adverse impact on the forum. But one may argue forcefully that the SAARC was launched taking into account this reality and the charter that was formulated on the basis of consensus provides for regular meetings including summits annually. But the conference of heads of government is not taking place regularly. This however delivers a body blow to the SAARC. In the last 18 years, eleven summits have taken place whereas one such event in a calendar year was the objective of the SAARC. It is heartening that the next summit has now been cleared but member states must take great care that this important event is not put on the

Bilateral disputes are not covered by SAARC which discusses common issues of all members. By the same token, it is expected that SAARC must not be bedeviled by bilateral disputes. After all, SAARC events also cast a sobering effect on the contentious relationship among the member states. SAARC should not remain a hostage to bilateral issues and hopefully the spirit of collective good will get precedence over other extraneous

MATTERS AROUND US

Bilateral disputes are not covered by SAARC which discusses common issues of all members. By the same token, it is expected that SAARC must not be bedeviled by bilateral disputes. After all, SAARC events also cast a sobering effect on the contentious relationship among the member states. SAARC should not remain a hostage to bilateral issues and hopefully the spirit of collective good will get precedence over other extraneous matters.

time and again two nations have expressed their unflinching adherence to the SAARC despite the fact that both dragged their feet in extending support to the concept when it was mooted by then Bangladesh president Ziaur Rahman in late seventies. It is believed that both New Delhi and Islamabad looked askance at the idea initially but once they gave their nod they definitely showed keenness to see that the enterprise flourishes. But their enmity prevented the SAARC, launched at the first summit in Dhaka in 1985,from having a ment would be held in Pakistan in January,2003.Evidently, the summit preparations were generally initiated long before and it was clear in mid 2002 that the Islamabad summit had run to trouble owing to fresh Indo-Pak disputes that cropped up during the interregnum of the last summit and preparatory time for the next one. The result was obviously the setback for the SAARC and well wishers of the forum were waiting with bait breath when the difficulties would be over so as to facilitate the staging of the event. For them

development, one may also say that it would have been better if the dates for the next summit could be fixed within the current calendar year since the charter attaches particular importance on the supposedly annual event within a calendar year. Anyway, barring unforeseen developments, the 12th SAARC summit now looks certain to be held on the scheduled time. The decision of the standing committee has set at rest all speculations about the summit, which is immensely important for keeping the venture going on the desirable

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

relations among the members and more particularly two major nations in the group, the achievements of the forum can be described as laudable. The integrated programmes of actions and the performance of the technical committees are no mean attainment unless someone has too high expectation from a body like this. But it is the political bickering that is taking heavy toll of the SAARC in the sense that it is obstructing its normal course which may be humble but not without success or

ences that often characterise the

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Gratitude for our newspapers

I really thank the Prime Minister as she will bear all the educational expenses for Shohag to become a Computer Engineer. I feel proud of our newspapers. I think many other people of our country also feels the same like me. The reporters had done really a good work for a computer genius like Shohag. Living in the city like Panchagarh and works in such computer stores, it would be not possible for him to continue his future life as he wanted before. But now its possible for him to continue his life according to his desire.

It makes me so happy that only for our reporter's article now a teenage boy can fulfil his long

cherished dream. I trust he can achieve the best in his life and for that I gave all the credits to our national dailies. I became really tired of reading only dishearten news in our dailies. But this news gave me a real satisfaction. Our newspapers proved one more time that it's the best media to connect all the people of this universe. It's also unimaginable for me that our PM took her attention on such types of creativity news. It's great. I want to give my gratitude from the bottom of my heart to our national dailies who makes hohag's dream come true in his life. I hope in future our newspapers will keep doing such good works. Again thank you very much. Samiha Esha Uttara, Dhaka

Capital market

Kindly allow me to ventilate my views on the above subject. In modern times capital market is a major source of industrial financing and an avenue for investment by the general people. Bangladesh capital market is relatively small. Its market capitalisation is a little over one billion dollar. Capital market got a big jolt in 1996 when some vested interest group enacted a share scam in a cool and calculated manner. Many small investors including many retired officials who invested their life's saving in the share market became pauper. While such a tragedy was enacted the then Awami League government simply watched as a silent spectator. As a result people lost their confidence in capital market and the lost confidence is yet to be revived to a desirable level. But we are still to go a long way to build a vibrant capital

There are three major players in capital market. The first is the issuer companies which issue shares, the second is the stock brokers through whom people buy and sell shares and third is the Securities and Exchange Commission which act as a regulatory body. Most of the issuer companies of Bangladesh, though not all, make profit by manipulating their accounts -- they show loss and thus deprive the Share holders. Many of the brokers of Bangladesh also on many occasions misappropriate money of the shareholders and account holders. Dhaka Stock Exchange has so far failed to discipline its broker members. For all these reasons capital market of the

country is not gaining strength. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) is the regulatory body which frame rules for capital market and they also act as the watchdog. Hence it is needed to be manned by honest and efficient people. Honesty is the first prerequisite for the chairman and members of SEC. The government should be extremely cautions and careful that such incidents do not take place again. All efforts should be made to improve the capital market and not to destroy it. Government has a duty to the investors

and not to the exploiters Mrs. Anwara Begum Gulshan, Dhaka

Bangladeshi troops

in Iraq

Bangladesh have excelled in UN peace-keeping duties around the world but involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan is not a good idea. Because these wars on terror were actually blatant acts of aggression based on insufficient evidence and

alleged involvement' in 9/11. The primary reason for Secretary of State Powell's visit was the US realises that the continual death toll of US troops will have a negative impact on the forthcoming US election and they are in desperate need for non-US troops to act as bullet fodder to support its

Of course a good relation with the US will certainly have at least a temporary positive impact on

garian Security Council voted the pre-Iraq war UN resolution in favour of the US. Because, US was support needed for Bulgarian entry to NATO.

Bangladesh's economy. The Bul-

Unfortunately, poor countries will always take a selfish stance to better their own position even if it is at the expense of international peace and stability. So I will not be surprised if Bangladeshi troops do end up in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries that the US plans to leave behind in a trail of destruction with its tactics of 'shock and

Abdul M. Ismail

Mossley Hill, Liverpool, England The Indians have turned down a

US request to provide troops for

Iraq. The reason given was simple. India, having opposed the war without UN approval, could not now send troops when US was in charge there. Therefore, for Indian troops in Iraq, a UN resolution is a pre-requisite. The Indian decision is a rational

TO THE EDITOR

one, taken professionally. In contrast, we have been equally, if not more, vocal against the war and here we may be planning to send our troops to Iraq. I do not think it will be a wise

decision if the Foreign Ministry decides to send our troops. In fact the ministry concerned should have been more frank when Mr. Powell was in Dhaka.

Shahjahan Ahmed Dhanmandi, Dhaka