

Poor standard of education

Inefficiency takes its toll

DR M ASHRAF ALI

ALTHOUGH education is considered mainly to be a social welfare sector expecting no immediate return, investment in education nonetheless calls for consideration of such factors as cost-effectiveness, rate of return, etc. as in the case of investments in other sectors.

From the point of view of cost-effectiveness, the education sector has come under serious criticism from many quarters due to the colossal wastage and poor return from whatever investment has been made in this sector. Bangladesh gives very low priority to education in terms of investment in comparison to other sectors and per capita investment in education in Bangladesh is one of the lowest among the developing countries. However, the question remains that whatever little resources we have, it must be spent in a manner so that optimum benefits can be obtained. Unfortunately, in the case of education, the efficiency of performance of the sector has been at a very low level.

In education mainly two types of efficiency may be considered, namely, internal efficiency and external efficiency. Internal efficiency is concerned with the quality of teaching, physical facilities, curriculum, quality of teachers, etc, while external efficiency is concerned with the successful utilisation of the product that comes out from the education system.

By and large, the internal efficiency in our education at all levels, starting from the primary education upto the university has been extremely poor. In this

respect, primary education which is considered to be the foundation of our education system has suffered from wastage and neglect that is simply colossal. Although the bulk of the allocation for the sector is being spent for primary education, the outcome has been most depressing. In a recent survey conducted by the IER in selected primary schools of the country, it has been found that there were less than 20 students in class V on the average. In some schools, there

many school teachers after liberation due to political pressure and influence. These unqualified teachers are doing the greatest damage to the nation.

Due to lack of supervision of these schools, absenteeism among the teachers is rampant leading to a complete erasure of the sense of responsibility and dedication, the most desirable qualities expected of a teacher. The lack of minimum of facilities, such as, benches and non-involvement of the community

poor quality of teaching and management. Nowhere in the world can one find such large percentage of failures in spite of the huge fund invested by the government as well as by the parents.

In the same way higher education is characterised by a mismatch of the objectives and the curriculum. The lack of a need-based curriculum renders higher education useless in most cases. It is high time that large-scale curricular reforms are

tion system has proved highly inefficient in that it has failed to produce the right kind of skilled manpower for some sectors, while there is an over-supply of graduates in such fields as liberal arts and social sciences for which there is very little demand in the country. And this imbalance has been perpetuated at the heavy cost to the country and its people. Besides, due to an unprecedented slump in the economic activities in the country job opportunities are dwindling every year. It is estimated that educated unemployment in country stands at about 40 per cent which is alarming considering the wastage of the money and energy.

A general review of the existing scenario in the education sector speaks of an impending crisis. In order to develop our manpower, it is necessary to increase the rate of investment in education and at the same time efforts should be intensified in order to attain optimum benefit from the amount invested.

Greater accountability and closer supervision of the whole system should result in improving the quality of education at all levels. It is uttered often from high levels that education is the back-bone of the country. Looking the way education is being managed, this utterance appears more as a lip service than as a matter of conviction. Whatever the matter, the fact remains that we must accept that education is the only means of emancipation of our people from the present poor level of living.

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were only five or three students in class V. This proves beyond any doubt that the enrolment figures are highly misleading and do not provide a true picture of the situation. The staggering rate of dropout is also a reason for the wastage.

In spite of some attempts, it has not been possible to arrest the drop-out rate in the primary schools which is still as high as 70 per cent. Although widespread poverty of the parents has been identified as a major cause for dropout, there are other reasons which are equally important. The poor quality of teaching in these schools by inefficient and often uneducated teachers render education un-interesting to the youngsters who leave the schools in disgust. It has been a great mistake to employ huge members of pri-

in the affairs of the school add to the poor state of affairs going on in the primary schools.

Recently curriculum has been modernised and new textbooks have been introduced in the primary and secondary schools, but no refresher training has been provided to the teachers to teach these new subjects properly. The result is anybody's guess. Incapable teachers find it difficult to teach these subjects and therefore no learning is taking place in the primary schools. One source has mentioned that the wastage in primary education is about 80 per cent.

The case of secondary and higher education is no different. Huge failures in SSC, HSC and degree examinations speak clearly about the inefficiency of the system, mainly due to the

undertaken to modernise university education in order to make it more efficient

The recent proliferation of private universities with meagre facilities have pulled down the quality of higher education. Proper monitoring and supervision should be geared up to ensure quality of teaching and learning in higher education. The private universities and also doing brisk business by charging very high fees from the students.

External efficiency is mainly related to the demand of the skills and knowledge attained by the students through the education system which has market value. In other words this refers to the employment opportunities available in the country for the graduates from various educational institutions. In this respect also the educa-

A tribute

Salma apa : Memories of conversations and candles

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

OF all the people I knew in Bangladesh, few could fill us with the confidence of unquestioned integrity as Salma apa. She was Salma Sobhan, legal expert, activist and a person of great learning but more than that I suppose, human being who had an open mind. That astonishes us more than many of her achievements especially as we stare at this world of ours being shrunk either by ambition or narrow mindedness.

We are losing those who made the darkness that shrouds Bangladesh a little less heavy. With her passing away, what ended was a sort of narrative on living which few practice, which she did effortlessly because the contradictions between her life and her work and more significantly, her mind were almost not there..

Salma apa. always in a hurry peering through her thick rimmed glasses, seemingly hiding some enigmatic anxiety I never understood, was also the most engaging conversationalist I have met. There are many talkers, more than we desire to meet, with enormous capacity of being boorish and boring but there are very few conversationalists. She didn't just talk but also listened and what few do responded. And she never ever imposed but sometimes offered corrections and then left the opinions to be reshaped on their own. Few were like that.

I refer to her conversations because there were a number of occasions where we spent hours talking on subjects that were hardly part of our formal topic. Many years back at my Unicef office, we chatted for a long time on the Suhrawardys who were her uncles. I had said that it was striking how brilliant and versatile the lot were and before and after. This was because we were discussing this book on the politician Hossain Shaheed -- once Pakistan's PM -- but I was more fascinated by the scholars and academics and more adventurous



ous ones than the ambitious and controversial politician. It seemed at some point of time, of several Suhrawardys, one was at the Calcutta University, one at Moscow while the third was in the UK, all teaching from history of art to law. There was just no other brood like them.

She laughed and said, " Yes. We seem to have a great deal of education and a gift for the gab but never any money." It did describe her as well.

I think it's this gharana of sharafatee and culture that she takes away with her and which is not growing or happening anymore. She certainly represented a rapidly vanishing world.

She like many others was deeply disturbed by the failure of the Bangladesh state to deliver a poverty free land. It was not an abstract question that could be asked or explained away by academics but she was the more genuine one of those who interacted with citizens denied of any voice in the construction of this State. She heard the questions first hand and experienced them as recipients of failed policies. She felt that deeply and it almost haunted her with a kind of a guilt.

" I just don't think it's working and what we haven't been able to do is popularise this notion of sharing and sacrifice. We don't have enough for all and a few are taking far too much. We should

reflect on what we can give up, how far we can give up. Maybe I can go as far as having an indoor toilet and no more. Maybe then others can further and that way others can have what is now my surplus."

It was not an economic prescription but words wringed out from a bleeding heart.

Perhaps she also knew that this would not make a difference but for a person who had staked so much in the dreams of a people that wasn't political independence as much as it was economic freedom, she felt pressed. But because she wasn't part of the establishment in the conventional sense, she could feel that she had a right to question and ask why things had gone wrong. But it went beyond just being resentful and she spent the last thirty years constructing with Hameeda apa and others what is today's legal aid world with its platform firmly planted on women's rights.

She was disappointed but didn't throw up her hands and gave in. She slogged on, never choosing the easy way out and did what she thought she could do best.

Our social conversations were always tinged with her sense of obligation and she would sometimes do work that were tedious and boring. When I asked her about it, as part of a group trying to set up an organisation focusing on the rights of HIV+ victims, she just smiled. "If you don't take care of the small things, they return and mess up the big picture."

This piece is not about personal and private memories but to remember a person who probably was as close as anyone when it came to being a complete human being. She bore many sorrows, private and public but she shone on like a daring candle in the dark battling the gloom even at noon.

Japanese soldiers venture overseas

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

JAPAN'S Asian neighbours remember vividly what exactly happened when Japanese soldiers ventured overseas with the mission of 'liberating' Asia from the yoke of colonial rule. As the troops of the Imperial Japanese Army 'liberated' one after another countries like Korea, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Burma and eventually reached the eastern edge of British India, it didn't take much longer for the people of those newly 'emancipated' territories to find the true nature of the liberators who simply replaced the existing form of colonialism by a much more oppressive and less tolerant one. This resulted in thousands of death and massive destruction in countries that Japan invaded in the pretext of helping them to get rid of colonial subjugation.

One of the first Asian politicians to realise the true motive of the Japanese troops at the time was the Burmese nationalist leader Aung San, father of the imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. He welcomed the arrival of the Imperial Japanese Army to Burma, and like Subhash Bose, tried to turn England's peril into his country's opportunity, and make England's enemy his country's friend. But unlike Subhash Bose, the pragmatic nationalist leader of Burma soon realised how hollow the Japanese promise of liberation from the yoke of colonialism sounded, once the troops of the Imperial Japanese Army started to run the affairs of the state. Aung San, after all, had a much more stronger support base in his own country than what the exile Indians enjoyed. This allowed him to make a proper assessment of the situation from a different angle and he didn't hesitate to switch over side again to join the ranks of the advancing British army in driving the Japanese out of Burma.

This episode is now part of history of not only of Burma and Japan, but also of the whole Asia. Japan's neighbours had the unique opportunity to witness in first hand the real face of an army that once pledged to liberate them from Western domination. And as this happened a little over six decades ago, the memory still remains sharp not only to a whole generation who went through the experience, but also to their offspring who were repeatedly reminded of the fact

CLOSEUP JAPAN

The second Monday of January is observed in Japan as the Coming-of-Age Day, when young people who turn twenty in the past one year mark their transition to adulthood. This year a survey among those young adults were conducted in the northern town of Asahikawa on the dispatch of SDF unit to Iraq. In the survey conducted by a citizens group of the town, young adults were invited to place stickers on a board to show if they were in favour or against troops deployment. The result showed 16 supported the deployment, while 49 opposed it.



and its outcome. Hence there is a suspicion surrounding anything of Japanese that has military touch. Branding the Japanese army with the innocent name of 'Self Defence Force' didn't come to any help to Japan. On the contrary, the name raises suspicion of the real motive as the self proclaimed 'self defenders' in subsequent years have turned into one of world's most heavily financially cushioned military forces with an annual budget many times higher than most other military forces of the world. As this army is now poised to get involved in direct confrontation in the muddy waters of Iraq, many in neighbouring countries as well as within Japan are questioning the real motive behind the declared 'humanitarian' mission involving armed military personnel.

Japan's defence agency chief Shigeru Ishiba gave the dispatch order last Friday for ground troops to Iraq. An advance unit of 30 Ground Self

Defence Force (SDF) members has been ordered to fly to Kuwait by the end of this week to prepare for the eventual dispatch of a 500-member contingent. This is for the first time since early 1940s that Japan's military personnel are being dispatched to a nation that is in a virtual state of war.

The Japanese ground troops will operate mainly in Samawah, a southern Iraqi town with a Shiite majority and considered relatively safe. The advance team will carry out activities for about a week and study security conditions. Some members of the team will then return to Japan and submit a report to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and other government officials. The prime minister will then make the final decision about sending the core group.

Earlier, speaking at a press conference at Tokyo's Foreign Correspondents Club, Japan's defence chief said that the deployment of Japanese troops to Iraq on a humanitarian

mission could serve as a model for future peaceful operations by the Japanese military on foreign soil. He told reporters that the results of the mission would have a strong impact on the question of whether to give the military wide freedom to participate in expeditions beyond country's borders.

One can easily conclude from the remarks of the defense chief that for Japan the military operation in Iraq is going to be a testing ground. If everything moves as smoothly as the ruling elites are expecting, this might lead to further military missions in near future, an option that Japan's neighbours are suspiciously looking at. China was the first country to demand an explanation of the planned Japanese troops deployment in Iraq. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged a senior Japanese foreign ministry official to give Asian countries a full explanation of the planned dispatch of troops to Iraq as the move without a UN

resolution differs significantly from Japan's previous policy. North Korean criticism, as expected, was much harsher, while South Korea had to swallow the bitter pill keeping silent over the issue as its own troops are now in Iraq helping the United States to tightening its grip over the occupied land.

Japan's planned Iraq operation, despite winning support of the ruling coalition parties, is facing strong opposition within the country too. Criticising the recent dispatch order, Naoto Kan, leader of the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan said, sending the SDF to Iraq to cooperate with the occupation forces would not gain the understanding of many Iraqis. Officials of the Japanese Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party called the SDF dispatch a violation of the constitution.

Japanese public opinion is also predominantly against sending troops to Iraq. Not only grown ups and members of the older generation are opposing the idea, even among the young the move failed to win any support. A teacher of a junior high school near Tokyo recently asked third-year students whether they thought the SDF should be dispatched immediately or later, or even not at all. Out of 38 students, three said they supported sending troops without any delay, five voiced in favour of waiting, while the rest said they entirely opposed the plan.

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A leader foiled by an old system

Mexico's transition to a modern democracy has been held back by the country's old institutions and dysfunctional political parties

JORGE G. CASTANEDA



MEXICO and Vicente Fox are at an impasse. Halfway through Fox's term as president, Mexicans are disconcerted with his government, and so, increasingly, is the international community. The defeat last month in Congress of a package of government-sponsored legislative proposals means there will be no tax, energy, labour or political reforms any time soon. What's more, the economy is showing little sign of improvement. Unemployment has been rising, and per capita incomes have fallen over the last three years. The modest GDP growth estimates for this year and next -- between 2 and 3 percent -- suggest little change in a country that has become, in many ways, lethargic. Perhaps the only area in which Fox may achieve a major objective is in foreign affairs -- if the Bush administration's ambitious but still fuzzy immigration-reform policy truly legalises the millions of undocumented Mexicans in the United States.

Fox isn't really to blame for his failures. His PAN party lacks a majority in Congress and gets no cooperation from the political opposition. In fact, Mexico's transition to a genuine democracy, with a modern economy supporting it, has been held back by the country's old institutions and dysfunctional political parties. There are three -- the long-dominant PRI, Fox's right-of-centre PAN and the relatively young, left-wing PRD. All are deeply divided and discredited: in last July's midterm elections only three of every 10 Mexicans voted for these parties.

The Fox team, including this writer, decided from the outset to pursue important economic and social reforms -- indigenous rights, energy and tax reform, to name three -- without first attempting to modernise Mexico's institutional framework. That tactic didn't work. For example, aside from Costa Rica, Mexico is the world's only democracy that forbids legislators to run for a second term. In addition, Mexico does not have any provisions for calling nationwide referendum on constitutional and international issues, and there is no runoff mechanism for presidential elections. As a result, the reform agenda has stalled.

Mexico's political parties all reflect the ideological cleavages of another era. They belong to a time when Mexico lacked democratic rule, before its economy was opened to the world and NAFTA was established, and when the Cold War defined foreign relations. For 71 years, until Fox's Inauguration in 2000, the PRI ran everything and constituted the proverbial big tent, where everyone could fit. Today that party's leaders are devoted exclusively to conserving their perks. Only thus can one explain how free marketers like former presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Ernesto Zedillo shared PRI kinship with energy nationalists rabidly opposed to private investment in oil or electric power; how European-style social democrats and Castro-ite revolutionaries coexist in the PRD, and how Roman Catholic, anti-American, right-wing ideologues cohabit the PAN with modern social-Christian reformers. No wonder Mexico's political parties were unable to pass any reforms: there is no consensus within them, let alone among them.

What can be done? First, Fox should make clear that institutional reform is his top priority. He must push for the idea of legislative re-election, for constitutional referendum and for the establishment of a prime minister appointed by the head of state. These moves would promote the existence of a majority in Congress, even if it is not always the president's. He should make it plain to the nation that without these reforms, Mexico cannot be effectively and democratically governed.

Second, the president should ease monetary and fiscal policy to get Mexico's economy growing again. The country cannot recover exclusively by hitching itself to the United States. Mexico must boost government spending so that investments can be made in infrastructure, education, law enforcement and anti-poverty programmes.

And finally, Mexico should take advantage of its still-immense resource wealth. Within the existing legal structures of the state oil company, PEMEX, oil exports should be dramatically expanded. Mexico could increase exports of crude oil by more than 50 percent by the year 2006, and is already moving in that direction. But Fox should make this goal explicit. Through these three undertakings, Fox might be able to revitalise the political parties so that they face up to their responsibilities, ignite an economic recovery (however modest) and enhance Mexico's future. The goals are less than what Fox and his team originally dreamed of achieving. But they have the advantage of being feasible. After three years of political stalemate, small steps forward can look large.

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