

Biased school book selection

Education ministry must explain

A political slant appears to have tainted the selection of more than 500 extra-curricular books for secondary level students under a development project designed for students of 2,317 selected secondary schools. To our mind, the best interest of the nation's children couldn't be served by putting partisan political self-interest above education which is universally accepted as something apolitical.

Most of the 532 books that have been selected by an education ministry committee reflect a certain failure to look beyond the party and rise above cronyism. Dozens of the books are little more than political propaganda materials and historical distortion. Almost as troubling, many of the books on the list have been adjudged by impartial observers and educators to be of poor quality or unsuitable for secondary school age children.

Indeed, it is apparent that many of the books have been selected because the writers and publishers are close to the ruling party. Many of them are virtually unknown and have little reputation in the publishing industry. Others, while of good quality, are material-wise too stiff for secondary level school children, but have been included due to the connections of the writers and publishers.

The first point that we would like to make is that academics should be immune to any kind of meddling and propagandising. Politicisation is to be eschewed because it can breed divisiveness in society, but when it comes to the minds of the young it can really perpetuate such tendencies.

The second point is that it shows a contempt for the needs of children that is the opposite of what we would want our political leaders to show. They make pretty speeches about their commitment to the future, but when the time comes to put money up-front, we see where their priorities lie.

We would like the education ministry to explain to the nation what criteria were used for the selection of the books, and we would appreciate some transparency brought into the project so that we can quantify the benefits that will have accrued to the publishers and writers who have been so fortuitously named.

Punishing the constituency

An example of BNP's inner self?

BNP leaders and activists in Narsingdi went on a break-and-burn frenzy on Friday, after they came to learn that the party's parliamentary board had nominated Khairul Kabir Khokan, a former student leader, for the June 22 by-election to Narsingdi-1 seat. People in the town virtually became hostage to the demonstrators who were smashing everything in their way. Even rail communication was disrupted as the signal system at the railway station was damaged by a rampaging mob.

Now, this is a case of discontent within the ruling party being brought on to the streets in a brazen manner. The first question that arises is, why did they turn their ire on the people and objects by no means responsible for the party decision? Sadly, such incidents only reflect lack of discipline and democratic behaviour within the party. The mayhem also shows that political activists have become so intolerant that they cannot even accept their own party decisions in good grace.

Another point of concern is that political activism seems to revolve around elections only. Personal stakes in getting elected have become too high to suit the needs of a democratic order. It seems party men cannot see anything beyond their future based on election.

People expect a lot more disciplined behaviour from ruling party adherents than what they witnessed in Narsingdi. It is these same ruling party men who often blame the opposition for creating chaos and confusion through their agitational programmes. While the opposition tries to put pressure on the government to accept its demands, the point of the ruling party activists turning anarchic is indeed not clear -- who were they addressing during their violent demonstrations?

The ruling party activists have to realise that they have a role to play in consolidating the democratic process, and they cannot indulge in violence without setting bad examples, as they did in Narsingdi.

CCC polls an eye-opener

Saiful Alam

"DISCREPANCY of nearly one lakh votes, not a matter of joke!" This is how one individual expressed his reaction in the aftermath of the CCC poll results. Indeed it belied all predictions of neck-to-neck fight, rather turning out to be a one-sided game at the end of the day. All parties involved heaved a sigh of relief as the elections passed off peacefully barring a few stray incidents that are typical in a society like ours. The victor and the vanquished both deserve to be highly appreciated for exchanging greetings which is rare in our political culture.

Although it was a civic body election, it assumed the political dimension of a national event with the ruling alliance mobilising its high profile ministers and MPs and the opposition under the banner of Nagorik Committee gathering almost all leading opposition stalwarts for the election campaign. But at the end it appeared that the voters had already made up their minds. It was a clear manifestation of triumph of people power. It was also people power that perhaps thwarted what many suspected could turn out to be a last minute "vote fraud campaign" to alter the results.

It was a race neither party could afford to lose. So much was at stake for both of the contending parties at a time when the general election is not too far off. The win or loss meant so much to the parties that they would like to read into the outcome not only the will of the citizens of the port city, but also of the electorate of the entire country. Many would conclude that the majority who voted

against Mir Nasir in fact voted not only against him, but also against the ruling alliance. The election result is a sign that the government should read carefully and correct their faults.

trality of the administration was in doubt. The suspense reached its zenith on the evening of the election day when vote counting was abruptly suspended for unknown reasons for quite some time. But

like Jamaluddin, and open secret extortion in the commercial capital. Other reasons included excessive dependence on a particular alliance partner and projection of Mir Nasir as a member of the Zia

family by Tareque Rahman, who seems to be the worst loser in this election as it was his first election campaign in favour of a party nominee and to which he attached much importance.

By whatever yardstick one judges the outcome of the CCC mayoral election, the defeat is a lesson for the BNP and four-party alliance. The debacle was obvious as the voters were aggrieved on several fronts, including continuous price spiral of essential commodities, widespread corruption, abduction of businessman like Jamaluddin, and open secret extortion in the commercial capital.

On the other hand, parties now looking for a united stand to see the ruling alliance off in the next parliamentary election have a great lesson to learn from the election. It is this that they will have to be on guard to make sure that the voters' will gets reflected in the result. The mayoral election had a concentration of workers and leaders. So focused was it that any wrongdoing could be brought to the notice of the authorities. In national election this will be nearly impossible because it will never be possible to deploy truckloads of law enforcers to all 300 constituencies countrywide. But if they want the popular will to be reflected, they will have to ensure similar vigilance.

The election was a test for the Election Commission (EC) also, having seen its image dented after the Dhaka-10 by-election. During the campaign there was wide allegation of money power playing its part, distribution of saris, lungis, and cash among slum dwellers. It was also alleged that at times the tone of campaigning by government leaders amounted to intimidation. With the day of election approaching nearer, the air was ripe with rumours that one party or other would rig the election as the neu-

an uncompromising EC finally succeeded in presenting a reasonably free, fair, and violence-free election to re-establish its independent image.

However all was not quiet on the election front, as the helplessness of the EC was exposed through this poll. Various controversies and irregularities in the appointment of polling officers and the role of EC secretariat and police have once again emphasised the demands for reforms to the EC to make it stronger and let it have an independent secretariat with adequate manpower and logistics so that the EC can appoint its own officials as returning officers. There is a lesson for the EC from CCC polls. If holding a city corporation election requires 20,000 security personnel, then how to manage the national polls when all the 300 constituencies go to vote simultaneously?

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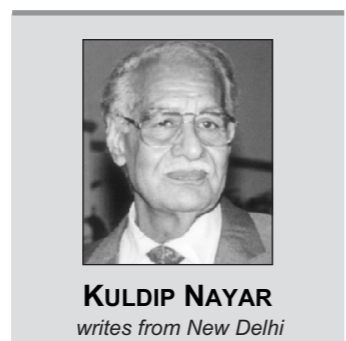


The victorious Mayor of Chittagong.

In the end, the debacle of the ruling alliance candidate in the CCC polls will give confidence to the opposition parties now agitating for reforms in the caretaker government system and EC. Now the Awami League and its allies in the movement for reforms will prepare to step up the combined movement, cashing in on the poll results, as the results will surely infuse some new life into the opposition camp. In fact, this was the first serious contest after the 2001 general election that had thrown the opposition to the sidelines of national politics. The CCC polls have also proved that the four-party alliance can be defeated by unity among the progressive and non-communal forces. So the opposition seems to be doing everything to continue this spirit until the next parliamentary elections.

Which is why, on the other hand, the ruling alliance, particularly BNP, appears to be looking for new allies, as the CCC poll has exposed the vulnerability of the alliance compared to the combined strength of the opposition. As a result, in coming days the nation may witness desperate game of alignment and realignment in both camps, centring on choosing reliable and effective partners to contest the next parliamentary elections. In this game, the role of main actor will be played by different splinter groups of the Jatiya Party and some Islamic parties and groups not related to the four-party alliance. In the new polarisation, the possibility of an emerging third force comprising some right-wing parties with heavy-weight leaders cannot be ruled out altogether.

Reflections on one year of UPA rule



Kuldeep Nayar writes from New Delhi

I do not know why Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has taken certain decisions at the end of his one-year rule -- decisions that do not fit into his style of functioning. Nor are they part of his make-up. They do not bring him any glory. If anything, they confirm the general impression that he is not his own master.

Take the appointment of Navin Chawla as Election Commissioner. He may be an efficient officer. But he carries the taint of atrocities committed during the Emergency. His name is spread all over the report of the Shah Commission which went into the excesses. That Chawla is close to the dynasty -- he was Sanjay Gandhi's Man Friday -- is all the more objectionable because, by sheer seniority, Chawla will be the Chief Election Commissioner in 2009 when the general election is due. In his farewell remark, the outgoing

Chief Election Commissioner Krishnamurthy woefully said that he feared politicisation of the commission. Maybe, he had Chawla's selection in mind.

I do not see any difference between Chawla's appointment by the Congress and that of

Sharma by the BJP as member of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Chawla has been rewarded for his proximity to the dynasty and Sharma for his assistance to former Home Minister L.K. Advani to untangle himself from the charges in the Babri masjid demolition case. Chawla was nearly appointed Home Secretary, but kept back intentionally because he had only a

gorical in its pronouncement.

Justice Phukan says in his report that after examining the records of each of the past transactions and the evidence, both oral and documentary, "it has found that there was no illegality or irregularity" in the 15 defence transactions referred to the commission. The government did not want to make the report public. It was the Lok Sabha Speaker who

and fomented by certain Congress leaders. The party may have a problem of dealing with those named in the report, but the question that the party should ask itself is: should such people be permitted to stay in the Congress?

Politics of convenience is not the word which I associate with Manmohan Singh. Why didn't he put his foot down and dismiss all

Sadhu Yadav, the known tainted persons.

Politically placed as Bihar was, there was probably no escape from another election. But it is obvious that the exercise began when Ram Vilas Paswan's men started moving towards Nitish Kumar, an important functionary in the BJP-led NDA. The governor should have gone over the exercise of inviting different

that the Congress cannot take the Left for granted has become a c l i c h é . My worry is that the Left is beginning to enjoy the limelight it gets because of the association with the government. Comrades are being taken in by the "importance" both Manmohan Singh and Sonia is giving them. The Prime Minister calls them for breakfast and reportedly takes them into confidence. Sonia is inviting them to her residence and often agreeing to their point of view. Has the Left assessed the government performance in terms of the common man's lot?

The cost of living is going up practically every week. Weavers, cobblers, ironsmiths or people of similar professions have been without job for months. The unorganised labour, whose amelioration is included in the CMP, is only having a dose after dose of promises. And there is no well thought out programme to provide drinking water.

Probably, one year is too short a period for the results to fructify. The Left could have at least ensured that the Congress doesn't hijack key appointments. See the appointment of governors. Manmohan Singh has shown no less nepotism than the Atal Behari Vajpayee's government. But I am told that the comrades have also recommended the name of their "men" to positions in the government and its committees. I never imagined that the Left would become a part of the furniture so soon.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Strange, Manmohan Singh should have agreed to hold back the release the Nanavati Commission report on the 1984 riots. Even after 21 years of riots in which 3,000 Sikhs were killed on a single day in Delhi alone, the government is not willing to face the truth, only a part of which has come out. Is it because the Congress government was in power then?

few months left in service. As Election Commissioner he gets five years. For Sharma, the vacancy in NHRC was kept unfilled for six months till he retired from CBI directorship. His tenure is for six years.

Again, political considerations seem to have weighed with Manmohan Singh when his government decided not to accept the Phukan Commission's exoneration of former Defence Minister George Fernandes from allegations of corruption in defence deals. No doubt, Fernandes wrongly allowed Justice Phukan and his wife to go on a junket using a defence aircraft. But this is an act of indiscretion for which Fernandes can be asked to pay. But this cannot be the basis for rejecting the report which is cate-

directed the government to lay it on the table of the house.

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I have talked to Justice Nanavati after he submitted the report. He had no words to describe the tragedy.

He said that the murder and rapine were deliberate, planned

pleas against the release of the report? As a member of the Rajya Sabha, I have watched his performance for six years. I could never imagine that if he were ever at the helm of affairs, he would let petty party considerations prevail over what was legally and morally right.

What should I make out from what has happened in Bihar on the eve of his completing one-year rule? The Prime Minister announces one day amidst applause that the bane of the administration is the frequent transfer of district magistrates and superintendents of police. But within 24 hours, Bihar Governor Buta Singh, the centre's instrument of power, sends on leave two district magistrates, who had challenged Shahabuddin and the second

political parties to assess their strength before recommending the assembly dissolution. The centre has betrayed unnecessary haste.

It hardly matters that the Left kept away from the UPA celebrations of the one-year rule. The Left cannot thus wash its hands off the responsibility for the failures of the government. After all, the Left is part of the UPA apex body, presided over by Congress president Sonia Gandhi. The Left is also privy to common minimum programme (CMP) and joins in the occasional exercises carried out to assess what went wrong and why.

By openly expressing unhappiness over the government's lack of performance, the Left leadership may placate the cadres but not people. Even the rare threat

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR 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.

Collapse of factory

When buildings cause deaths, it's time to finally get serious about building codes, zoning codes and the performance of those we pay to enforce them. If we ever doubted the power of careless building and zoning standards, the collapse of the Spectrum Sweater Factory in our premier EPZ in Savar should cure us of any illusion. Consider the fact: In the space of a minute something like 300 lives were snuffed out when a building, founded on sheer greed, collapsed in a heap. The last time I looked, that's many times the number of lives rubbed out each day by the high-tech weaponry deployed in war zones like Iraq and Afghanistan when they were truly sizzling! Let's forget the twaddle. Let's abandon the claptrap. The

esteemed OC of the Detective Branch tells the Daily Star that he "cannot trace the owner" of the Spectrum Sweater Factory, relative of an "influential ruling party lawmaker," for want of a home address.

Rajuk claims that its responsibilities start and end with setting policy and issuing permits. If you are responsible for forbidding the public from building killer buildings or filling low-lying areas that serve as flood protection, you are responsible for seeing that they jolly well don't. As Zarina Hossain points out in her letter (April 17, 2005), a building does not go up overnight. Even a six-storey edifice takes at least 24 months. Plenty of time for Rajuk's officials to see, observe and act. And do

what the public pays them to do.

It's time we gathered in our Nerocos, whether in or out of retirement, and started the process of attaching their houses, assets and pensions as compensation to the public who have had the thankless job of paying their salaries all these years.

Sultana Alam
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Land of controversy

It is very unfortunate that our country is turning into a land of controversy. The EU has passed a resolution on Bangladesh politics, which will ultimately end up in controversy. Separation of judiciary from executive is also now delayed. Killings of opposition politicians are under trial and God knows when we will see the final

judgement and its execution.

Reform in Caretaker Government system seems to be a tug of war. Not to say about the emergence of fundamentalism, relations with Neighbour, the ACC episode, dearth of right personality to head constitutional positions likes EC, ombudsman etc.

The capacity of the government to handle existing contentious political issues or otherwise seems to be very efficient. Management by crisis seems to be the strategy. However, I would point out that the government is primarily responsible to guide the nation as per its political mandate received during the last election.

A Bangladesh abroad
On e-mail

Give them

compensation

The managing director and director of Spectrum Sweaters and Knitting limited reportedly appeared in the court with about 50 lawyers, led by the Dhaka Bar Association president. No doubt they have got the money to come to court with 50 renowned lawyers! However, I hope the victims' families will at least get compensation.

Dwindling economy

The economy of Bangladesh is not faring well. If we just think of the banking sector, it would be worth remembering what the outgoing BB Governor said only the other day. He (Dr. Fakhrudin Ahmed) has clearly said that overall economic growth momentum cannot

be generated by momentary policy alone. Pro-growth law and order situation is a pre-condition for that. This is a thing that we all know but he said it only to confirm that he could not play the desired role because of the adverse law and order situation. The same impediment will limit the success of the new Governor, Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed, too. There is no doubt about it. He would be able to do nothing due to poor law and order and as such his dream of freeing the banking sector from the clutches of defaulted loans and making this sector a really dynamic one will remain unfulfilled. Nevertheless, we are sure he will do his best to see that some tangible positive results are achieved.

The overall price situation in the country is steadily deteriorating

despite some steps taken and the prospect of a very good IRR1-Boro crop. The government decision to revise upward oil and gas prices and introduce the new pay scale for public employees and pay arrears from Jan. 1, 2005 will definitely add fuel to the fire, thus raising the inflation rate from about 7 per cent to around 10 per cent. In fair, according to neutral estimates the rate has already reached the double-digit level. The coming budget with a pro-people (alias pro-election!) bias will only deteriorate the situation. Sale and closure of a number of mills and factories resulting into decline in overall input will also act as a negative factor. It may be noted that all the pleasant stories we know about new foreign investments are only registration data or proposals and nobody knows when these will

materialise, uncertainties are likely to deepen following the daily news of border clashes with BSF.

The worst economic scenario is now being reflected by the virtual collapse of the share market with little official support or intervention. The DSE and CSE indices fall almost five days a week, going up very little only once in seven days. This has a lot to do with confidence in the economy governance and overall economic management but the authorities do not seem to take it seriously.

Let's hope sense will prevail and necessary steps will be taken and with immediate effect!
Fakhrudin Ahmed
On e-mail