

What do we teach our children?

Religiosity should not be confused with bigotry

THE World Federation of Teachers' Unions meet in Dhaka on Wednesday revealed some stunning facts that should concern us deeply. A study shows that since Independence while our primary schools have doubled, the religious schools known as Madrasas have grown eight times. In terms of enrolment the growth of the latter has been 13 times. The sheer magnitude of growth of religious schools clearly indicate the volume of students getting a certain type of education that does not make them competitive for jobs in the modern world, especially for a country that aspires toward fast industrialisation. In addition, there are unknown number of religious schools that are set up, funded and managed privately. These schools are not registered and do not give out any recognised certificate by any established authority. Yet they exist and operate because often they are the only so-called educational institutions in a particular remote area.

Religious education can have a very positive impact on the growth of a child. They can add, and often do, an ethical dimension to education as a whole if imparted in the right spirit. However, serious questions can and needs to be raised as to what is being taught in our Madrasas. In the recent times many of the science subjects have been added to the curriculum of the more established and government supervised Madrasas. But this cannot be said of the vast number of them outside the official ambit. Here the main emphasis is not on education as much as it is on indoctrination. There is a vast difference between gathering knowledge about our religion, learning the true meaning of our faith, developing skills to interpret and understand the numerous facets of the Divine message on the one hand and becoming a bigot on the other. The crucial difference being openness to knowledge and learning and being told that we already know everything there is to know and all that is left is to 'parrot' the available texts.

There is an urgent need to seriously examine what is being taught in our Madrasas, not to stop them or curtail their operation but to help them become the source of a competitive labour force in today's world.

Win over Sri Lanka

Congratulations to our cricketers

THE victory of the Bangladesh cricket team over one time world champion Sri Lanka is a matter of pride for all of us. In the modern day list of international sporting events cricket occupies a special place. This is the most significant victory in Bangladesh's cricketing history after it defeated Australia, the world's number one team. However, as we celebrate the victory it is also important to remember that, since Bangladesh's entry into international cricket it has to its record a total of 11 victories out of a total of 117 games. Therefore as much as this is an occasion for rejoicing it is also time for stocktaking of and reviewing our overall performance. Let this victory be the guiding spirit for future victories, after all nothing succeeds better than success. It is also time to reflect on our losses so that the weaknesses could be identified and removed.

Cricket is a game that requires inputs not only from the players but also proactive support from the relevant authorities. If we are to become a cricketing nation of some consequence this is the time that we should revamp the entire management aspects of the game. We should further streamline the team selection process including overall transparency of operations of the Board responsible for administering and the management of our national team.

In today's world, in order for a game or a sport event to reach a level capable of competing with other teams of the world professionally, it must have adequate support of the State and that support should be free from any bureaucratic or partisan influence. At the same time sufficient authority should be vested with the Manager and the Coach including the selectors to freely and impartially perform their respective duties with utmost sincerity. Arrangements should be made for adequate and intensive training facilities both within the country and abroad, to acquire both physical and mental sturdiness. Sufficient inputs should be provided so that our players have more exposure playing international games overseas.

Bangladesh has but few windows of excellence, cricket certainly has a high potential of being an addition to that list.

Wish our boys and all others involved the best of luck.

What else shall be discussed in parliament?



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

N the meeting of the treasury bench-dominated Business Advisory Committee (BAC) held on February 16 under the chairmanship of the speaker Jamiruddin Sircar, none of the AL's proposals on matters of urgent public importance was included in the agenda for discussion in parliament due to the stiff resistance from the ruling BNP members. The media reports suggest that the opposition proposals related to issues like serial bomb blasts, price spiral of essentials, fuel, power and fertiliser crises, mass arrest, the Kansat carnage, corruption, law and order situation and murder of a Rajshahi University professor.

The main opposition AL members disagreed with the ruling BNP members' contention that "usually no general discussion is held in parliament during discussion on the thanks-giving motion on the president's speech." The AL members said that they had demanded discussion on these issues of urgent public importance under rules 62, 68 and 147 of the rules of procedure (ROP) of parliament and the ruling party members rejected their proposals violating the ROP. Following the rejection of the AL proposals by the ruling BNP members in the committee, the Speaker would dispose notices of the opposition on those issues in the house.

Now, let us see what do the rules 62, 68 and 147 of the ROP say? Rule 62 read with rule 61 says that a motion for an adjournment of the business of the house for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of recent and urgent public importance may be made with the consent of the speaker. Such a motion shall be preceded by a notice submitted by the member concerned to the secretary to parliament who shall bring the notice to the knowledge of the speaker and the minister concerned. Rule 63 imposes certain restrictions on the right to make an adjournment motion, which, among others, include: (i) no adjournment motion shall be moved on any

day fixed for general discussion of the budget; (ii) the motion shall be restricted to a specific matter of recent occurrence; (iii) the motion shall not relate to matters which can only be remedied by legislation; (iv) the motion shall not raise a discussion on a matter pending before any statutory tribunal or statutory authority performing any judicial or quasi-judicial functions or any commission or court of inquiry appointed to enquire into, or investigate any matter; (v) the motion shall not deal with any matter which is under adjudication by a court of law; (vi) the motion shall not contain a reflection on the conduct of the presi-

Power crisis
There are certain sectors of the economy that are known as "engines of growth." Power is such a sector. But there is a big gap between the demand and supply of electricity. The Daily Star carried a front-page report on February 20 which showed a gap of 825 MW between generation and demand in the evening of February 19. According to Power Development Board (PDB) source, the country will experience the highest-ever amount of power shortages in the coming summer and the extent of load shedding may cross the limit of 1,500 MW. Power crisis has

country, particularly in the northern and southern districts, have posed a very serious threat to achieve the target of boro cultivation. Available information suggests that in the northern districts, the main boro growing area, boro crops are wilting fast while thousands of hectares of land remain uncultivated due to lack of irrigation caused by the on-going fuel and power crises. Farmers are putting barricades on the roads and laying siege to the offices of the deputy commissioners (DCs) and different local government offices for fertiliser and diesel. The officials of the department of agricultural extension

affairs, the transportation problem created "the artificial crisis" of fertiliser. The government can explain what measures it has taken to ensure availability of fertiliser and diesel in sufficient quantity at the farmers' level. Mere formation of a central committee under a deputy minister to monitor the marketing of fertiliser and fuel will hardly have any impact unless availability of enough fertiliser and diesel is ensured and the distribution system is freed from political bias. A motion in the house will further give the government an opportunity to tell the people through the house why it cannot keep the oil prices down. The

burning issues. Further, it is not fair to discuss these urgent matters of public importance in the thanks-giving motion on president's speech.

Corruption

Corruption is pervasive in every sphere of our national life. It has badly affected the rate of our economic growth and increased the gap of distribution of wealth in the society making rich people richer and poor people poorer. Bangladesh's ranking as the most corrupt country in the corruption perception index (CPI) of Transparency International for five consecutive years beginning from 2001 has tarnished the nation's image.

Professor Muhammad Yunus in his speech on January 4 at the 15th anniversary of The Daily Star diagnosed that politics was killing the spirit of the nation. In his words: "It has led to our major national crises: 1) limitless corruption, 2) rise of unprecedented terrorism, and 3) fast deterioration of the public service structure. They are all inter-connected and linked to politics."

By bringing a motion on the issue, the lawmakers belonging to treasury and opposition benches can discuss the ways as to how to combat this hydra-headed monster. They will render a great service to the nation if they can make a meaningful contribution to this end.

To conclude, in a country like Bangladesh where democracy has made a fresh start, the ruling party or leadership must do everything towards developing a political culture that would contribute to the successful functioning of democracy. To attain this objective, the ruling leadership must, among other things, respect the opinion of the public and opposition, resolve all political disputes with the spirit of democracy and take steps to make parliament effective. The leaders of the two major parties, the BNP and the AL, have already promised to make parliament the right place for discussing and resolving the major national issues. Bringing motions on burning issues like power, fertiliser and diesel crises, price spiral of essentials, corruption, etc. and their discussion in the house will be a big step forward to make parliament the centre for decision-making on all major national issues.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.

BARE FACTS

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dent or of a judge of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

The ROP empower the speaker to decide the admissibility of the motion.

Rule 68 says that any member desirous of raising discussion on matter of urgent public importance may submit notice to the secretary to parliament. The speaker, under rule 69 of the ROP, can decide admissibility of such a notice.

Rule 147 read with rule 146 and 148 of ROP provides that a member desirous of raising discussion on a matter of public interest may submit notice to the secretary to parliament subject to certain conditions which, among others, are: (i) the motion shall raise one definite issue; (ii) it shall be restricted to a matter of recent occurrence; (iii) it shall not relate to any matter which is under adjudication by a court of law.

The speaker is empowered by the ROP to decide the admissibility of such a motion.

Rule 35 of the ROP provides that other business of a formal character may be transacted on a day before the house commences or continues discussion on the president's address.

The proposals submitted by the AL are of urgent public importance and in consonance with the ROP. If not all, the following proposals should be cleared for discussion in the house following the prescribed procedure in the on-going session even if the tenure of the session is required to be extended.

affected industrial production and brought sufferings for the city dwellers. A very senior official of the jute and textile ministry recently disclosed that twenty-two state-owned jute mills in the country incurred a loss of Tk 75 crore in last four months due to power failure. What is however most alarming is the threat it has posed to the irrigation dependent boro cultivation, which is the second main rice crop in the country.

The BNP-led alliance government should tell the people through the House why during its past four years it could set up only an 80 MW power plant when the demands for power shot up by more than 1000 MW. Was it due to non-availability of assistance from our development partners for this highly capital intensive sector? Or was it for repeated cancellation of tenders (for establishing power plants) because of involvement of "invisible hands" while addressing a gathering of bureaucrats on February 1 in the capital to launch the Public Expenditure Manual, finance and planning minister M. Saifur Rahman said that invisible hands were involved in manipulating the tendering process? Or was it due to any other reason(s)? If the government provides cogent reason(s), the people will appreciate it. It will also give the government an opportunity to inform the people through the house how it is going to tackle the situation.

Diesel and fertiliser crises

Diesel and fertiliser crises in the

(DAE) are predicting a harvest shortfall of boro this year. Mentionable that foodgrain (rice and wheat) production in recent years has not been able to keep pace with the population growth. For instance, foodgrain production in 2003-2004 stood at 274.43 lakh metric tons (MT) against 267.58 lakh MT in 2000-2001. This means an increase of only 6.85 lakh MT against the population growth of 6 million plus during the period.

ADhaka daily (The New Nation) in its editorial on February 20 wrote: "Since we have opted for parliamentary democracy the politicians are supposed to follow the norms and rules of the system. Scopes are wide for raising in parliament matters of public concern and national interest, censor the government for its lapses and to compel it to go to the right way. Currently the country faces severe load shedding of electricity, scarcity of diesel for irrigation of the paddy fields and fertilizer as well. It is not understandable why the opposition should not come up with adjournment motions on such vital issues. Follies of the government and steps for overcoming the crises will come from the deliberations of the members. If the ruling party obstructs the motions to come to parliament it should be construed that the party does not believe in parliamentary democracy in its letter and spirit."

A motion in the house will enable the government to explain if there was a real shortage of fertiliser, or as claimed by the state minister for home

prices of oil have gone up in the international market and subsidised lower prices of oil will encourage its smuggling across the border.

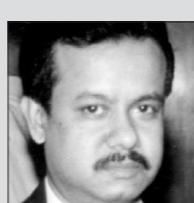
Price hike of essentials

The spiral of prices of essentials has brought sufferings for the people, particularly for poor and fixed wage earners. The point-to-point inflation rate hit a new 8-year high of 7.95 percent in November, which declined by 0.88 percentage point and stood at 7.07 percent in December. The poor, constituting about 50 percent of the total population of the country, are the worst sufferers of the inflation rate hike, as they have little ability to adjust with the increased prices of essential commodities. By allowing a motion on this issue the government can seize the opportunity of explaining to the people the reasons for price hike of essential commodities that are imported from abroad. It can tell the people how the price incentive of local agricultural products gives a boost for increasing agricultural production.

The government can further tell the people through the house what steps it is going to take to increase the income of the poor and the fixed wage earners.

The treasury bench is telling the mainstream opposition lawmakers that they can discuss these issues in the thanks-giving motion on president's speech. It may be noted that the president's speech has not even made a mention of the above discussed

The dead river



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

THE rolling grass abruptly ended where the land sloped into the dead river, whose low water invited storks, herons, kingfishers, lapwings, titmasks and yellow-beaked blackbirds to cool off their feet in the heat of summer. In the winter, the river looked even more spent and dry, its bed rising like the back of tall reeds, black ants, cow dung, bird drops, foxholes, crabgrass, and wild creepers.

He was scuriously brought to this world, mid-wifed by his grandmother who was so tense and nervous that she couldn't remember years later if there was a moon in the sky. Her daughter was lying on a tattered rag spread out on the grass, her body

convulsing in labour pain, while the hard tinder of summer wind lashed on their faces as both mother and daughter sweated in pain, fear, shame, and outrage. They were hiding in the darkness of night to bring a child into the world.

His grandmother said she did not hear the cry of the newborn because it was drowned by yelping foxes, barking dogs, hooting owls, and the uproar of people chasing a thief across the village. She struggled to save the fluttering lamp from the

her misery in the dingy quarters of a notorious brothel. He came to know of it much later, when his grandmother said to him that a woman's body was the most vulnerable of all assets in the world.

Ever since then he felt that his body was marinated in the shame of his mother, its cells overflowing with the despair of a woman who was used by men to do their pleasure. He grew up without knowing his father, his mind foraging in the womb where the lust of an unidentified suitor had

landfilling, and, just a few steps from where he was born, a textile plant drowns day and night as if to mock the river which had once stood silent over the anguish of a disgraced woman.

After the death of his grandmother, he came to the banyan tree many times with the yearnings of a nostalgic traveller, who wished to return where he started. This is where he was born, not in a proper home, not in a proper bed, not a father waiting for him, no relatives, neighbours and well-wishers waiting outside the

the evening along the riverside in the midst of turned earth of cultivated land as if smelling his past in the awakened and renovated aroma of fresh vegetation. It amused him that he was able to walk in the broad daylight on the same bank of the river where a woman he never saw had come to shed her burden of shame in the middle of the night.

On the second anniversary of his grandmother's death, he realized he was of the same as his mother when she died. He lived all these years like

CROSS TALK

Then the rumour started to spread that the old man had got his comeuppance. For the first time in many years the villagers flocked towards the dead river. They must find the sad young man who should know that the stream of life is a lot like the river, that what is thrown into it washes up somewhere. He listened to them and looked at the sky. Has it worked for the dead river? Everything thrown in it accumulated and choked its water.

fierce wind as her mind wavered whether to shove the baby in the mud or keep him alive.

The baby absorbed the horror at his birth, which hardened inside him like a sharp object, its edges stabbing him to remind that he had arrived in this world like a thief breaking into a house. It would often come to him in his dreams, when he would wander in the blind alleys of a labyrinth world, scurrying and hurrying to find his way, waking up panting in the middle of the night. His mother had died before he learned to walk, the consumption of shame and sorrow putting an end to

sprinkled the seeds of a disturbing life. He could often feel that he was lying on the damp floor of his mother's womb, listening to the ecstasy of a bursting new life in the lustful union between a man and a woman. His grandmother comforted him that the tree couldn't choose the hand which planted the seed.

The dead river was now arid and narrow, running its course like mere stain of water. The banyan tree stood in the same place like a relic of time, its branches hanging as if the dishevelled hairs of a distraught soul. The bend of the river was sealed by

labour room to cheer the coming of a new life. He would feel lonely at times, bereft of any anchor in the world, drifting like a boat coming from nowhere and going without a direction.

In the afternoons, when children played in the field, screaming and shouting in the mirth of life, their parents coming to chase them home, he would be overcome with a strong desire to belong to someone, someone who could make him feel the pull in his blood just the way the gravitational attraction of the moon pulled water. He would go for a long walk in

a puzzle that got more complicated the more he pieced it together, finding that he didn't have a father, finding that his mother had died, that he was born on the riverbank, that his mother had a sordid life. Why was he born, if he was meant to be so unwanted?

His grandmother explained that it was God's wish to give the life one gets. But how could that bring him comfort as he twitched in hatred for the man who begot him as if he was no more than an accidental growth on some body waste. This man left him inside the womb of a woman with the ease of spitting his phlegm to clear his

throat or dropping the mucus after blowing his nose. Why God gave him a life that was conceived in the summer of lust, not in the spring of love?

Two years later, an old man died of electrocution while working in the paddy field. At night he put electricity in the field to keep rodents and other nocturnal animals from coming to ruin his crops. In the morning he turned off the switch and went to remove the weeds in the field, which was under ankle-deep water. His ninth wife didn't realize that her husband had gone to the field so early in the day and flipped the switch thinking he had forgotten to turn it on at night. The old man shook like a springing toy and dropped dead within minutes before anybody could know what happened and come to his rescue.

For the next few days the entire village buzzed with conversations which revolved around this tragic death. People asked what sin a man must commit in life to deserve such a pitiful death. Some joked that the young wife had done it out of desperation to pump some electricity into her sagging husband.

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campus since last one decade has become the battleground