

Students' concerns over quota system

Rethink and review civil service recruitment process

THE concerns voiced by students of Dhaka University and other public universities in recent days about the nature of recruitment to the civil service merits serious consideration. Those concerns have essentially centred on the demand that the existing quota system regarding such recruitment be done away with. It is principles that are thus involved here, those with which we largely agree. Indeed, the students' emphasis has been on a civil service system based on merit rather than quotas. Considering the background against which the civil service in Bangladesh has performed so long, one can justifiably propose that the time has arrived when serious rethinking is needed on the question, in fact on a change of approach in recruitment to government jobs.

At the moment, civil service recruitment is based on a system where less than fifty per cent of selections to government jobs are based on merit. That naturally throws up a rather disquieting picture of a quota system where reservations for particular classes, in terms of districts, freedom fighters' offspring, ethnic groups and women, assume prime importance. As can all too easily be comprehended, such a system has been at work since the liberation of the country. And it has certainly not produced the body of talented and competent men and women who could have buttressed the entire civil service. Merit has regularly been a casualty, with the result that at the different tiers of administration mediocrity and ineptitude have been a dominant theme. Quality has thus been on a slide. The difficulty with a quota-based system is that it leaves an entire administration unable to cope with the demands that are made on it in a world of interdependence and extreme competition where putting national interests across is the issue.

Let there be a caveat here. Where a quota system involves women and the various ethnic groups, we cannot but uphold the system. These two groups are yet in need of a quota support in the civil service. But rethinking in such areas as regional or district quotas is seriously called for. As for the quota relating to freedom fighters' offspring, nearly four decades after liberation one wonders whether the system can logically apply any more. Our freedom fighters, those who died on the battlefield and those who survived to usher in a free Bangladesh, will forever be the repository of the nation's abiding respect. Their objective was the creation of a social system where a flowering of opportunities would lead to an overwhelming nurturing of talent.

It is such thoughts we bear in mind as we call for a review of the recruitment process to the civil service. The sooner the review is done, the better for all those young people on whom will depend the future of this country.

Textbook hassle

Solve the problem once and for all

IT is extremely disquieting to see that primary school children in Bangladesh have to suffer from late supply, as well as shortage of textbooks, year after year. It is either that the relevant government bodies have not taken lessons of the past shortcomings in the system and tried to resolve the problem for good, or that the problem is being deliberately bred by vested quarters to benefit from the resultant shortage of textbooks or it is a matter of poor planning and coordination all the way.

It is more than a month that the new education year has commenced, and yet, reportedly, a very large number of primary school students are still waiting for books to reach them.

To add to the woes, those books that are supposed to be sold at subsidised prices are being forced upon the hapless guardians and students at three or four times their actual rates, by creating a shortage in supply. A new dimension has been added to the problem where some old books that are reissued are either defaced or have pages missing, or are too worn out to be of any use by the students.

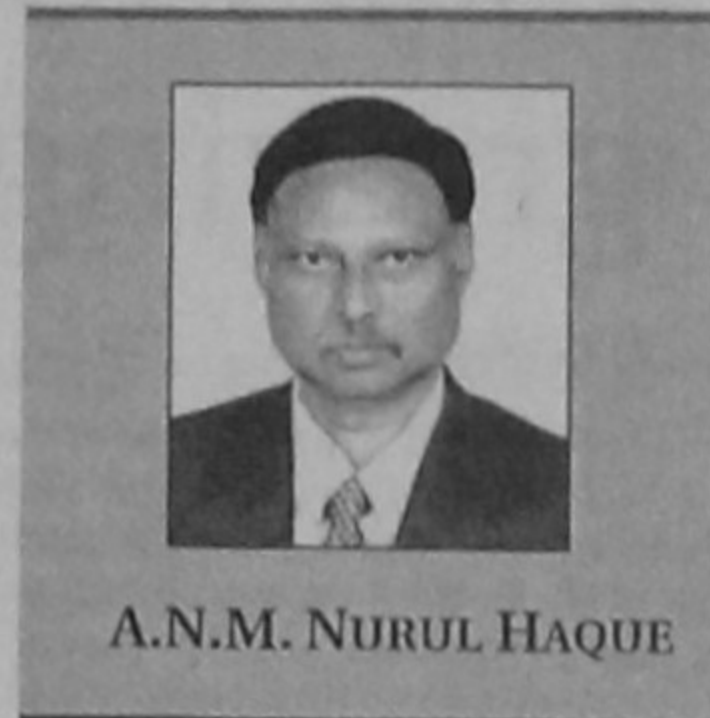
Why is it, may we ask, that every year books fail to reach the students on time when the education year is known to everyone well in advance? Why is it that there are not enough copies to go round when there is fairly dependable statistics of the number of primary students in the country? And why a stock can't be built up to cater for unforeseen demands?

We would like to ask why, as reported, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) did not take timely action to have additional copies printed, and why was the Publishers and Booksellers Association not given permission to go for printing additional textbooks for primary level when warned of the impending crisis?

We believe that there is substance in the criticism made by the teachers, guardians and booksellers regarding lack of coordination between various agencies involved in the planning, printing and distribution of free primary text books. There is perhaps equal merit in the report that there is an unholy nexus between a syndicate and dishonest NCTB officers behind the crisis by creating artificial shortage.

It is time the relevant authorities geared up the system and removed all the impediments to timely and adequate supply of primary textbooks to the students.

Looking North



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE council of advisers at its meeting held on February 2 at Rangpur Circuit House gave a nod to the caretaker government's 14-point program in a bid for rapid socio-economic development of northern region of the country, especially Rangpur.

The programs include formation of a committee to resolve munga problem, setting up of a full-fledged university in Rangpur, activating the airports of the region, construction and maintenance of roads, railways, bridges and embankments, and taking measures to export more manpower from there.

The chief adviser has also announced an action plan to rid the country's northern region of munga forever through well-coordinated programs of the government, NGOs, and private sector, as the lean-season death of food and work put people in extreme misery.

Focusing on the ways of eradicating munga, the chief adviser said a committee headed by the commerce adviser was formed in

BY THE NUMBERS

Budgetary allocation should also be enhanced for development projects in the northern region. Infusing dynamism in the local economy is a must to permanently end an endemic indigence like munga. In fact, the struggle for alleviating the misery of the poverty-stricken people of the northern region will never succeed without the strong commitment of the government.

the advisory council meeting in Rangpur that will co-ordinate all the ongoing projects for eradicating munga and poverty-alleviation aiming to formulate a multidimensional plan of action to eradicate munga permanently.

Putting emphasis on the cultivation of diversified food and other crops, the chief adviser suggested for undertaking income-generation projects and large scale export of manpower to foreign countries from the northern region through imparting training to them at various training centres and institutes in the country to offset munga.

A famine-like situation locally known as "munga" prevails every year in northern region of the country when millions of poor and landless people are compelled to starve due to a lack of jobs and a severe scarcity of food. Nearly 40 per cent of the total population in the districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh and Gaibandha are worst hit by this famine-like situation.

The munga, in fact, is a recurrent phenomenon in the northern

region of the country, particularly in the greater Rangpur areas. This seasonal crisis of unemployment and food usually occurs during October-November period in the agrarian northern region, lacking in industries and other income-generating vocations.

Crisis of food owing to their having no purchasing power; thousands of families of zero income go destitute and literally live on whatever they can scrape off their surroundings. In fact, munga is a sort of famine that stalks the northern region of the country multiplying the sufferings of the chronically poor people every year during the lean period.

Crippled by poverty during the munga period, the destitute people of the greater Rangpur and Dinajpur region compelled to sell their labour in advance at the cheapest rate in their bid to keep their families from starving to death. The landless poor people sell their labour in advance, even at Tk 35 per day when the wage of a day-labourer is Tk 100 per day during the season of harvesting paddy or other farm activities.

Many poor people also borrow

rice from the well-off persons on condition of repaying by working, as they become unemployed around this period of time every year. Those who sell their labour in advance do not get fair value of their wages and those who borrow money cannot earn a minimum living wage because they have to repay the money along with exorbitant interest. Thus nearly three million people of the greater Rangpur and Dinajpur region who are chronically poor are caught in such a cruel trap of poverty.

Many people also sell their domestic animals, household articles, and other belongings in order to combat munga situation. Those who have nothing to sell, flock to the upazila and district towns for any kind of jobs. The jobless poor people roam there in search of any type of works which are also scarce in the district and upazila towns of greater Rangpur and Dinajpur region.

Finally a huge number of these poor people migrate to the capital as the local economy is not sound enough to keep the locals in their own areas, providing them with any type of works during the lean

period. Thousands of these destitute people are seen sleeping on the streets, bus terminals, rail stations and launch terminals in the capital.

Relief and issuance of VGF cards, chosen as an easy option, is not a solution of munga, which has become an annual curse for nearly three million people living in chronic poverty in the northern region of the country. But the successive governments had never thought of any other remedial measures beyond relief, for durable solution of munga situation which is the outcome of joblessness of the chronically poor people during the lean period.

In November 2003, a parliamentary committee recommended urgent steps for crop diversification in the munga-prone northern region to absorb agricultural labourers who become jobless during the lean period. But no effective steps have so far taken by the government on the basis of the recommendations made by the parliamentary body to combat munga on a durable basis.

The constitution of the country in Article 19(2) of the Fundamental Principles of State Policy states: "The State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality between man and man and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and of opportunities in order to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the Republic."

The recent Household

Integrated Economic Survey report prepared by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics with a view to highlight the extent of socio-economic backwardness, revealed that Rajshahi division has the higher incidences of poverty (46%), compared to Chittagong division (34%), Dhaka division (32%), and Sylhet division (33%).

Though the constitution of the country has made it clear that, there must not be any disparity in the level of economic development in the regions of the republic, the northern region of the country is sadly experiencing it. Millions of people living in the northern region really felt cared for, as the council of advisers held a meeting there to expedite socio-economic development in the region.

The government should provide some direct incentives for setting up agro-based industries in the under-developed northern region. Infrastructure and other utilities must also be developed to encourage the private sector investment.

Budgetary allocation should also be enhanced for development projects in the northern region. Infusing dynamism in the local economy is a must to permanently end an endemic indigence like munga. In fact, the struggle for alleviating the misery of the poverty-stricken people of the northern region will never succeed without the strong commitment of the government.

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Quest for democracy



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

BIAFRAN conflict in Nigeria, failed government in Somalia, war financed by blood diamonds in Liberia, Hutu-Tutsi ethnic conflict in Rwanda and consequent genocide, disputed presidential elections spilling blood in Kenya, and the trial for corruption of the possible successor to Mbeke in South Africa does not speak well of the "Dark Continent" that British explorers had set out to explore and the colonialists decided to conquer.

In the Asian continent the Jewel in the Crown had been India where the battle of Plassey in 1757 established British rule till 1947 -- a rule that produced a stratified society of Ashraf and Araf salted by the British rule. The British had to create a privileged class because they were few and the Indians were many in number. So the freedom fighters of the 1857 war of independence had to be subjugated by the British and the locals who sided with the British were given titles and money for satisfaction of their greed.

Since a strict code of morals

GOING DEEPER

It is hoped that in Bangladesh, in the light of repeated assurances given by the people in power, we shall go beyond the bounds of electoral democracy along to the state of accountability of the people chosen to represent the electorate. One also hopes that since elections do not complete the democratic process, supportive institutions including a vibrant civil society would continue to be strengthened to keep watch lest the government were to stray once again.

was not meant to be followed to the letter by the local landlords of various statures, the British rulers were satisfied with the revenue received through the contract of permanent settlement. The system was widely practiced in South and South East Asia as in other places where the British ruled.

The British, though no less stratified at home, had Oliver Cromwell to cut off the head of King Charles I and Mary Queen of Scots lost her head in her struggle with Queen Elizabeth I.

The British, though tyrants in the places they had conquered, were fighting for the rights, albeit not democratic in the modern sense, that established the rules of governance between the king and his vassals according to the custom of the feudal law, and in 1215 King John had to give his consent to Magna Carta that over the centuries required the governments in England and in countries influenced by English tradition to follow the rule of law in dealing with their citizens.

Of the important clauses of the

Magna Carta were the promise that no one will be denied or delayed the right to justice; and that no free man will be imprisoned or outlawed or destroyed except by lawful judgment of his peers or trial by jury. The importance of the Magna Carta lies in its symbolism, as a precursor of the rule of law, the most basic tenet of democratic system.

It is generally accepted that Jean Jacques Rousseau's The Social Contract is a classic defense of the democratic form of government displayed in his implicit trust in the "general will" of a democratic people, as expressed by a vote of the majority, to make all important decisions.

The third wave of democracy, by Samuel Huntington's account, widened the political space for representative democracies where citizens' interests are looked after by the people elected to serve in legislative and executive positions.

The journey to the establishment of a democratic form of government was strewn with

thorns. The year 1642 saw the first popular rebellion against monarchy in England and the execution of King Charles I that spread to other European nations largely guided by political philosophers, notably the French philosophers Montesquieu and Rousseau, and the American political leaders like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Before the end of the 19th century, every important Western European monarchy had adopted a constitution limiting the power of the monarch and giving a considerable share of political power to the people.

The quest for democracy sometimes had seen departure from the struggle for equity. Thomas Hobbes' advocacy of a strong central authority, a form of government by which the ruled handed over all authority to the ruler, was due to the so-called English Revolution -- a time of great upheaval and disorder. According to Hobbes, total freedom in the state of nature left each man insecure and frightened at the unrestrained power of

other individuals, and life was "nasty, brutish, and short" as individuals are driven by insatiable self-interest.

English philosopher John Locke described his concept of a "civil government" by excluding absolute monarchy from his definition of civil society, because he believed that the people must consent to be ruled. Locke was more optimistic about the nature of human beings. He described a state of nature in which people tend to respect one another's natural rights to life, liberty, and property. The assumption that human beings are inherently good is at the heart of what has come to be called Lockean liberalism.

Bangladesh's quest for democracy took a serpentine course when the bond of a common religion was thought to be paramount, transcending the linguistic and cultural differences between the two wings of Pakistan. The war of liberation threw to the winds the two nation theory that preached that Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent could not live together.

The dream that liberation of Bangladesh generated in many hearts was rudely disrupted by extra-constitutional interference in the governance of the country. The country had come to the brink of civil war due to the machinations by the alliance government (2001-2006) in Bangladesh, whose unbridled commission of kleptocracy had generated skepticism among the people about the concepts of both Lockean liberal-

ism and that of Immanuel Kant's perpetual peace.

Besides this, the unending violence in Iraq, unilateral interpretation of security by the hyper-power, subordination of international law to the US domestic law, constant threat to Iran, inability to solve the Middle East problem, and tolerance of Israeli militarism in Gaza and Lebanon are contributing to a conviction that the clash of civilisations between Islam and Christianity is not a fiction after all, but a distinct reality.

Before the Muslim youths are further inflamed over continued injustice and exclusion by the West and become recruits of Osama bin Laden and his transnational network of terrorists it is absolutely necessary that socio-political and economic concerns of the developing countries be met through installation of democratic system of governance in as many countries as possible.

It is hoped that in Bangladesh, in the light of repeated assurances given by the people in power, we shall go beyond the bounds of electoral democracy along to the state of accountability of the people chosen to represent the electorate. One also hopes that since elections do not complete the democratic process, supportive institutions including a vibrant civil society would continue to be strengthened to keep watch lest the government were to stray once again.

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Too much of a good thing?

The scheme can be extended to encourage NRBs to set up import business for raw-materials and equipments for rural and agro-based industries. In sum, what is needed is a well-coordinated policy framework for enhancing remittance flows and the productive utilisation of them.

ANIS CHOWDHURY

THE flow of remittance has increasingly become an important source of our foreign exchange earnings. Mr. Halimur Rahman (DS, Feb 6) has highlighted the importance of remittance from NRB. Remittance was around 2% of GDP in 2001, and rose rapidly to 8.8% in 2007. This is a staggering increase in a short period of time, and exceeds the amount of foreign currencies received through foreign aid.

This is a very encouraging development, and policy-makers should consider seriously some of the measures to raise the flow of remittance further, as suggested by Mr. Rahman. However, we need to keep in mind that too

much of a good thing can be harmful.

Remittance and foreign aid both are sources of foreign currencies. They help us fill the resource gap -- the gap between our domestic savings and investment needs, and the gap between export earnings and payments for much-needed imports. Therefore, research findings on the effectiveness of foreign aid should apply equally to remittance.

Since the seminal work of Prof. Anisur Rahman in the late 1960s doubting the effectiveness of foreign aid, researchers are still debating the issue. Readers can read the former World Bank economist William Easterly's recent provocative monograph "White Man's Burden." Another

interesting read is Oxford Economist Paul Collier's "The Bottom Billion."

Besides generating scope for corruption, there are several reasons why foreign aid can be less effective. As Prof. Anisur Rahman showed, instead of adding to the pool of available savings, foreign aid can encourage consumption (especially government expenditure) and hence reduce domestic savings. In that case, there is no net gain in the total available funds for investment. Then there are leakages through mismanagement, lack of coordination, the choice of wrong projects, the inappropriate anti-growth policy environment, and so on.

Recent research on the effectiveness of foreign aid has intro-

duced the idea of diminishing returns. That is, there is an optimal level of foreign aid and beyond that level, the effectiveness of foreign aid declines.

Following this strand of research, some researchers even go further to claim that too much foreign aid can be harmful, especially if it comes at a rapid rate. They use a concept, called "Dutch Disease" or "Gregory Effect."

Nearly three decades ago, Bob Gregory of the Australian National University worked out the implications of the boom in mineral exports (especially coal) since 1964-65 that lasted until the early 1970s. He showed that the growth of a new export sector led to real appreciation, which had adverse effects on both import-competing and (non-boom) export sectors. This became famously known as the "Gregory Effect."

A similar phenomenon occurred in the Netherlands after the discovery of natural gas in the North Sea in the late 1970s, hence

the name "Dutch Disease."

How can foreign aid or remittance give rise to Dutch Disease or the Gregory effect?

There are basically two channels for this to happen. First, aid and remittance come in foreign currencies, but that needs to be converted into taka for domestic use. So when aid and remittance flows rise, demand for taka also rises, so the value (price) of taka goes up -- our currency becomes stronger. You can look at it from another angle: with increased flows of aid and remittance, the supply of foreign currencies rises and hence their price in taka falls -- foreign currencies become cheaper.

This may be good for imports and for people who want to take overseas trips, but it is not good for our exporters.

If the Bangladesh Bank wants to prevent this by supplying more taka to meet the increased demand for converting foreign currencies, there will be inflationary pressure. This also hurts

exports and encourages imports.

The second channel works as people who receive remittance (and the government who receives aid) begin spending. People spend on non-tradable products, such as real estate. So the demand for non-tradable products and hence their prices rise; investment and other resources move from the tradable sectors (such as industry and agriculture) to the non-tradable sectors.

People also spend on tradable products, like ready-made garments. This reduces the availability of tradable products for exports. The combined effect of reduced investment in tradables and increased domestic consumption of them is that exports cannot offset imports.

Thus, a sudden surge in remittance or aid can lead to a balance of payments crisis, and deindustrialisation. This can be very serious, particularly for a country like Bangladesh whose export sector is very narrow and

needs diversification.

Is the "Gregory Effect" or "Dutch Disease" a fait-accompli? Perhaps not in a country like Bangladesh, which has a huge potential and a large pool of unemployed labour. But we still have limited capital and skilled manpower. Therefore there can still be resource switching from the tradable sector to the non-tradable sector, and consequently Dutch Disease occurs.

However, there is now a growing body of research that shows that governments can prevent this. The government needs to invest in productivity-enhancing infrastructure, education, skill upgrading, and research and development, and create an environment for remittances to be used in productive investment.

While the current focus is on measures to encourage more remittance flows, the government at the same time needs to develop policies to encourage remittance receivers to invest in agriculture, rural and agro-based

small-scale industries.

The government can also ease the restrictions on allowable consumer durables that Bangladeshis working abroad can bring with them. This will lessen the pressure on the domestic supply of such items (either imported or locally produced). That is, instead of bringing money and spending here, they should be allowed to bring goods in order to prevent an additional burden on the balance of payments. This will be like commodity aid that transfers resources directly to the recipient country.

The scheme can be extended to encourage NRBs to set up import business for raw-materials and equipments for rural and agro-based industries. In sum, what is needed is a well-coordinated policy framework for enhancing remittance flows and the productive utilisation of them.

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