

Poor performance of rural schools

Tradition of academic excellence must be emphasised anew

HERE is little question that the results of the Secondary Certificate Examinations have been excellent this year. On our part, we have, through an editorial a few days ago, already extolled the performance of the students and their schools. We have also noted that there remains much room for improvement in the system and that ways and means need to be devised to ensure a zero failure school leaving academic structure in the country.

We are not happy to report now that there has been a widening gap between rural and urban education in Bangladesh, a fact that has once more been confirmed by this year's SSC results. Briefly, schools that have done poorly, even in this season of unprecedented success, are in the rural regions of the country. Obviously, as a report in yesterday's issue of this newspaper makes clear, a fairly good number of reasons are behind this decline in the performance of schools away from the urban centres. One reason is that while guardians in the towns and cities can afford private tutors for their children, those in the villages are in precious little position to be able to come by the same. Additionally, there has been a growing trend in rural areas for schools to go either without teachers in subjects like mathematics and English at all or without good teachers in these subjects. It may be noted that many of the schools which have in recent times been penalised through a suspension of teachers' monthly payment orders (MPOs) are located in rural settings. And that says a good deal about the impediments such schools are suffering from.

Observed from a broader perspective, though, there are important areas in which educational standards in rural schools can be raised to bring them on a par with those in the urban areas. An important first step is to identify those schools which in the period of the last four-party alliance government were brazenly politicised through a couple of bad steps. In the first place, school committees were peopled with local political elements who had little understanding of, or interest in, furthering education. In the second, a number of schools and madrasahs were opened through political patronage and in this way claimed MPOs they did not deserve. Strong and decisive action must be taken against them and those who helped establish them. There is then the matter of the facilities for rural schools, in such areas as libraries and laboratories, that must be taken up as a priority by the education department.

Time was when the bulk of Bangladesh's educated class, which went on to attain further laurels in the career field, came from its villages. That tradition of excellence ought to be emphasised anew in the interest of our collective intellectual goals.

Unspent part of police development budget

Is it lack of commitment or efficiency?

HERE are certain conclusions that one might draw from the fact that a large amount of development budget of the Police for the year 2007-08 is being returned to the treasury - because it could not be timely spent on the heads they were allocated for. But the explanation accompanying the story in a Bangla daily appears rather unconvincing. Because of lack of timely decision from the Home Ministry, an amount of Taka 112 crore has lapsed to the state. And the supposed reason that has prevented the officials of the ministry to give approval of various purchases - fear of being held accountable for any financial decision - has added an element of the bizarre to the matter.

At a time when we hear so much of talk about the need for modernisation of the police and enhancement of its efficiency, inability to make optimum use of the money for whatever reason, in a cash strapped economy like ours, speaks volumes about the competence of the state institutions as well as that of the relevant ministry. Not only have the police suffered an organisational setback, because of this other equally deserving sectors have also been deprived of the much needed fund, which they might have used up efficaciously.

Although lapse of a part of the development budget of the police every year is not a new phenomenon, the amount is horrendously large this year. While it may not be a bad idea to save money on revenue expenditure like transport fuel and other ancillary heads, unfulfilled development programme due to lack of decision or inordinately long-winded procurement procedures, is simply unacceptable - particularly if that relates to a force entrusted with maintaining law and order and internal security.

What makes the matter even worse is the fact that the allotments were meant for the procurement of such equipment that would have added to the operational efficiency as these equipment would have acted as a force multiplier. It is distressing, for example, that a large number of police vehicles remain un-repaired because someone in the ministry failed to give the necessary permission in time.

Admittedly, there may be many other reasons for this shortcoming. It is for the government to identify and remove those. Perhaps the IGP needs to be invested with more financial powers, but what is unacceptable is that responsible officers of the government would refrain from taking financial decisions due to a unique and peculiar psyche.

The ailment factor works wonders!

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Rahim Mia looks deeply at the imprisoned VIPs and remembers how hundreds of young men were hauled up in prison vans and dumped in cells at the order of those same heroin dealers and killers of his area got out as free men as they belonged to the party of those VIP prisoners. Today, he wonders why they were being given all sorts of privileges. He wonders aloud: "Are we the 'Children of a Lesser God?' Otherwise, why there is such glaring discrimination in treatment?"



SHAHNOOR WAHID

MANY things can happen in Bangladesh all at a time, and you shall have to be up and about not to miss any of it. After what you see on the surface, you shall have to dig deeper to comprehend the full meaning. Many of it will not make any sense and you will wonder aloud: Oh no! It was not supposed to happen like this! This is unacceptable! Why is he doing what he is not supposed to do! Why is he saying what he is not supposed to say! Gosh! What is happening in this country! Maybe, if you are a student of English Literature, you will say: There is something rotten in the state of Denmark!

Well, we don't know whether rotten or not, but if you were in prison today as a politician and had the updates about the ploys being applied to get the sympathy of the administration, you would be the happiest man in jail. Actually, there are various ploys that can land you in a cabin of a hospital with full-time AC, better

food and toilet. But to earn all that, first and foremost, you will need to take a crash course on acting. No, you will not have to perform an act from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That would be beyond the grasp of your 14 generation. It is lot simpler than any such dramatics. What you will have to do is, firstly, eat a sumptuous breakfast, and then take the makeup of a very sick-looking man.

Then, right before the administration officials, give your best shot... bend a little, walk slowly, cough a lot, grimace every now and then, distort your face, clutch your chest, shake your knees violently, roll your eyes and gasp for breath. Meanwhile, arrange for your party supporters to shout outside for sending you abroad for treatment. After that Oscar winning performance, nothing will stop you from getting the sympathy of the officials. You will earn full points and be given lengra am and rosogolla as reward. There is more. You will get that cabin with a better toilet.

And while the dramatics will go on, seeing your performance from a safe distance, a Rahim Mia will wonder why he and his 6-year old son were not given the same privilege by the same administration for committing a lesser offence. He and his minor son were in prison for an alleged dacoity case and there was none to offer them some mango or jackfruit.

Though he was not involved in the alleged dacoity, a corrupt police official included his name in the investigation report out of grudge when he refused to pay him money. His 6-year old son was also taken to the police station and kept in the lock-up for two days and two nights!

Rahim Mia looks deeply at the imprisoned VIPs and remembers how hundreds of young men were hauled up in prison vans and dumped in cells at the order of those same leaders who were playing badminton over there. He remembers how some known heroin dealers and killers of his area got out as free men as they

belonged to the party of those VIP prisoners.

Today, he wonders why they were being given all sorts of privileges. He wonders aloud: "Are we the 'Children of a Lesser God?' Otherwise, why there is such glaring discrimination in treatment?"

Rahim Mia and the likes of him are fools and they live in a fool's world. They have no idea of the ways of the game of politics as it is played today in Bangladesh by some corrupt politicians. Rahim Mias have no clue of the deals that are negotiated on the upper floors in the name of democracy, stability and upholding multi-party political culture. They cannot read or write but they listen to radio and TV reports on the political activities and the matters with the government and election.

They have never seen a voter list. They do not understand what is a good voter list and what is a bad voter list. They do not understand what those people have to



Abandon hope all ye who enter here - except if you are a politician!

talk about in the "dialogue" when the problems are so glaringly visible.

Don't the big, big sahibs see the arid farmland, the flooded plains, the burnt down forests, polluted rivers, depleting Sundarbans, encroached Cox's Bazar, wayward road transports, spiralling price of essentials, child and women trafficking, open-air heroin peddling and prostitution. So, Rahim Mias wonder, why don't they act now, instead of talking.

Rahim Mias will exhaust their lives pedaling rickshaws or pushing carts through the concrete roads under the blazing sun or carrying loads on their head or falling down from roof-tops of under-construction buildings. They will spend their free time standing in the queue for cheap,

coarse rice. One day, they will be packed up on a rickshaw-van and taken to a voting centre to cast their votes against the name of a "bhai."

They will be told that all their earthly sufferings would come to an end if they made the bhai the ward commissioner or the MP. But they will not have the time to say that the bhai was known for murdering two opponents years back and that he was an infamous smuggler and heroin peddler.

So, a whole new ballgame has begun in the country where people are falling sick potato. Just play your act right and the door next to freedom will be open.

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Let's not forget the rice market

BENEATH THE SURFACE

For quite a long time, poor Bangladesh paraded through the path of market liberalisation and self-reliance in food production. The result was good for some years till international market situation taught us a good lesson. Bangladesh should strive for self-sufficiency in food grain production through massive investments in research, extension, storage and communication. It will take a few days more for the rocking boat to reach the shore -- safe and sound.



ABDUL BAYES

TRULY speaking, the current crisis in the market of agricultural commodities, especially of rice, is a grave concern for policy makers. According to reports, this has forced the government to strengthen its monitoring capacity. Earlier, it was expected that the bumper boro harvest might fill the silos by luring producers with the higher procurement price.

Unfortunately, the boost in the procurement price (crossing Tk.700/maund mark) seems to have served little purpose as the rice market continues to remain as volatile as before.

Economists are also looking for clues and, possibly, pulling their hair in disgust and dismay.

The whole scenario relating to market behaviour drove us to dig into the data base of a recently completed Brac-backed survey of 62 villages, where household level information on marketing of products is shown.

It needs to be mentioned that the said survey was completed in February 2008, covering the 2007 crop season. For this year, of course, we can extrapolate the

events if we like. In the 2007 crop season, about 60% of farms marketed 37% of the paddy produced. At disaggregate level, we find that more than four-fifths of farms over 1 ha marketed about 55% of the output.

Market participation is low at the lower end of the scale: about 30% of farms marketing less than 20%. This is quite obvious. But when compared with the situation of 2004, we find marginal differences, both in terms of the size of participants or in terms of the size of marketed output.

For example, in 2004, almost the same proportion of farms sold 41% of the total production. Whereas, the yearly average price of paddy increased from Tk.242/maund in 2000 to Tk.496/maund in 2007, it exceeds Tk.700/maund now.

Such price rise should have swelled the market but, seemingly, the bitter experience of the recent past has made farmers more inward looking for the sake of food security. In fact, we observe a rise in marketed output in the case of vegetables, pulses and other cash crops along with price rise.

What has been said about paddy marketing before is about the whole year. But sales take place within one month of harvest on which brokers and agencies mainly bank upon. In economists' jargon, it is called "distress sale," or forced sale, as it occurs under the pressure of economic problems -- paying debts, meeting contingencies etc.

Economics is replete with researches as to how and why distress sales deprive poor farmers of their due shares. As we shall see later, our empirical observations reject such hypothesis.

In the 2007 crop season, about half of the farm households sold roughly one-fifth of paddy within one month of harvest. Again, as we move down the farm size groups, we find increasing proportion of harvest sales, thus negating the proposition that it is only the poor who sell quickly due to economic reasons.

As a matter of fact, nowadays, distress is overcome by other means such as remittances, credit from NGOs, government's growing relief operations etc., rather than disposing off precious paddy

soon as possible.

Both the rich and the poor look for some money, or the rich want space to get rid of the huge harvest. There is another point to ponder. The fact that harvest sales are no more signs of distress is shown by the fact that the difference between harvests and yearly average price hovered around 6-7%, implying no incentive for shelving sales for distant future.

But the worrisome news is that, back in 2004, the share of harvest sales was almost double at 41%! If we now project the recent past experience into 2008, we can possibly conclude that harvest sales this year could have been constricted further in the wake of growing expectation that rice prices might continue to rise further.

"Better late than now" position coupled with unscrupulous behaviour of rice dealers might have constrained the market supply situation. Under this condition, urban consumers and rural poor would possibly have to wait till a good amon harvest upsets the calculus of "better late than now" proposition. Meantime, produc-

tion situation in other countries seemingly point to sobering effect in the international market in the coming year.

Let us now look at marketing behaviour by farm size. Non-farm households and households farming less than 0.4 ha (less than 100 decimals) are net buyers of rice, who are faced with severe food crisis during rice price spiral. In fact, these households are 70% of rural households.

However, given this distribution of market participation, it is hard to say whether farmers would come forward in response to high procurement price. If last year's price hike could be a lesson for them, "better late than now" position would rock the boat a little bit more unless imports come in and hoarding in urban centers can be checked.

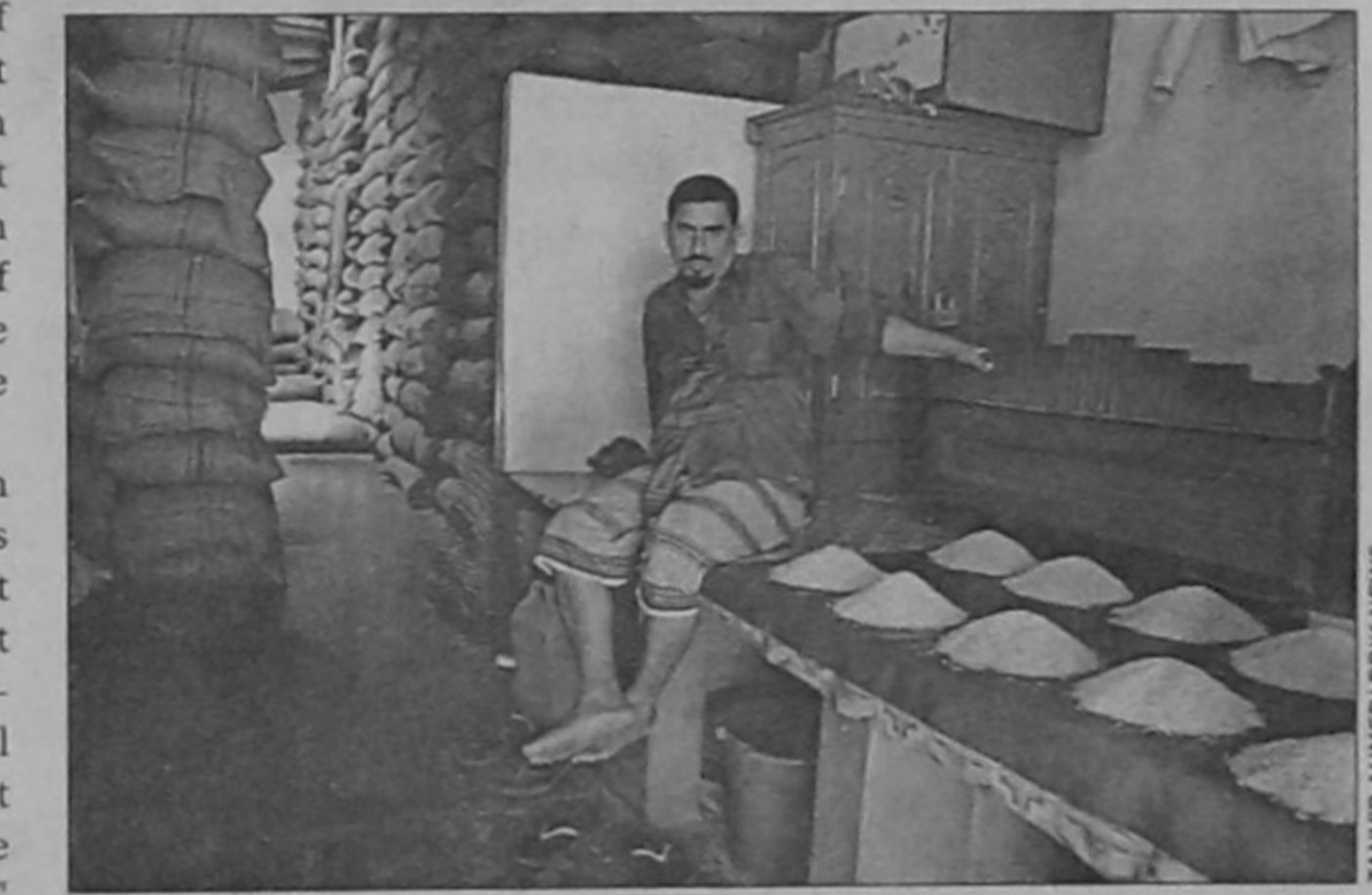
Usually, price responsiveness works better for crops other than

staple ones. Even in developed countries, market prices are not let to dictate responsiveness of farms. The states place a high stake on food security of people in the event of war or natural calamities. Subsidies on dairy products and sugar are clear examples.

For quite a long time, poor Bangladesh paraded through the path of market liberalisation and self-reliance in food production. The result was good for some years till international market situation taught us a good lesson.

Bangladesh should strive for self-sufficiency in food grain production through massive investments in research, extension, storage and communication. It will take a few days more for the rocking boat to reach the shore -- safe and sound.

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Rice price increases still.

India's search for a foreign policy

As one surveys the landscape of Indian foreign and security policy today, it appears strewn with wreckage on all sides. The Chinese have upped the ante on the border dispute, the terrorists are attacking the country with utmost impunity, the morale of Indian defense forces is at an all time low, the Maoists are gaining ground in large parts of the nation, the peace process with Pakistan is going nowhere, and the US-India nuclear deal is stuck with no resolution in sight.

HARSH V. PANT

INDIA has at various times been described as a rising giant, a superpower and by Indian leaders themselves as a "bridging power," but a closer look at the shambles that pass for India's foreign policy dispels such notions.

Take a look at the fate of the US-India civilian nuclear-energy pact. With time running out for implementing the pact, the Indian political establishment is in turmoil. The attempt to present a face of unity on the issue continues even though the vast gulf separating various political groupings has been clear for some time: The Communist allies of the ruling coalition have long made it known that they will not allow a US-India rapprochement to take place, and

were willing to let the government fall if it tried to go ahead. They have yet to forgive the US for winning the Cold War.

The opposition Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party is worried that its opponent will take credit away from its own nuclear legacy with this deal and insists that the true role of an opposition party is to oppose the party in power, even if it goes against the grain of what the BJP has long stood for. The coalition leader, Congress Party, meanwhile continues to muddle along, desperately trying to cling to power for a few more months and postponing a final decision for as long as possible.

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have upped the ante on the border dispute, the terrorists are attacking the country with utmost impunity, the morale of Indian defense forces is at an all time low, the Maoists are gaining ground in large parts of the nation, the peace process with Pakistan is going nowhere, and the US-India nuclear deal is stuck with no resolution in sight.

There's a whiff of fragility and underconfidence in the air, as if at any moment the entire façade of India as a rising power might simply blink out like a bad idea. The absolute control of the Communists on all realms of policymaking, the single point agenda of the Congress Party to stay in power as long as possible and the insistence of the BJP upon destroying its own credibility as a national party -- all have ensured that the Indian foreign

policy continues to drift without direction.

The seemingly never-ending debate on the US-India nuclear deal has made it clear that today Indian policy stands divided on fundamental foreign policy choices facing the nation. What Walter Lipmann wrote for US foreign policy in 1943 applies equally to the Indian landscape of today. He had warned that the divisive partisanship that prevented the finding of a settled and generally accepted foreign policy was a grave threat to the nation.

"For when a people is divided within itself about the conduct of its foreign relations, it is unable to agree on the determination of its true interest. It is unable to prepare adequately for war or to safeguard successfully its peace." In the absence of a coherent national grand strategy, India is in danger of losing its ability to safeguard its long-term peace and prosperity.

As India's weight has grown in the international system in recent years, there's a perception that India is on the cusp of achieving "great power" status. It is repeated ad nauseum in the Indian and

often in global media, and India is already being asked to behave like a great power. There is just one problem: Indian policymakers themselves are not clear as to what this status of a great power entails.

Bismarck famously remarked that political judgment was the ability to hear, before anyone else, the distant hoofbeats of the horse of history. In India's case, everyone but the Indian policymakers it seems hears the hoofbeats of that horse. Indian policymakers seem to believe that, just because their nation is experiencing robust economic growth, they don't really need a serious foreign policy and that ad hoc responses are enough.

There's an intellectual vacuum at the heart of Indian foreign policy that has allowed India's engagement with the rest of the world to drift and the result is that as the world is looking to India to shape the emerging international order, India has little to offer except some platitudinous rhetoric, which only shows the hollow-ness of India's rising global stature. However much Indians like to be argumentative, a major power's foreign policy cannot be effective in the absence of a guid-

ing framework of underlying principles that is a function of both the nation's geopolitical requirements and its values.

The Indian foreign-policy elite remains mired in the exigencies of day-to-day pressures emanating from the immediate challenges at hand, rather than evolving a grand strategy that integrates the nation's multiple policy strands into a cohesive whole that can preserve and enhance Indian interests in a rapidly changing global environment. Assertions, therefore, that India does not have a China policy or an Iran policy or a Pakistan policy are irrelevant.

India does not have a foreign policy, period. This lack of strategic orientation in Indian foreign policy often results in a paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, India is accused by various domestic constituencies of angering this or that country by its actions while, on the other hand, India's relationship with almost all major powers is termed as a "strategic partnership" by the Indian government. Soon it will be almost two decades since the Cold War officially ended, yet India continues to debate the relevance of the Non-Aligned

Movement (Nam).

Whatever the merits or otherwise of Nam, the Indian foreign-policy establishment seems content to rigidly hold on to concepts and intellectual frameworks that may have had some utility when they were developed but which have become outmoded in the present strategic context.

India is fortunate that it has encountered an incredibly benign international environment in recent years, making it possible for it to expand its bilateral ties with all the major powers simultaneously. This has given rise to some fantastic suggestions, such as India being well-placed to be a "bridging power," enjoying harmonious relations with the US, Russia, China and the EU. Such a suggestion not only implies that the major global powers are willing to be "bridged," but also that India has the capabilities to serve as that "bridge."

Moreover, the period of stable major power relations is rapidly coming to an end. Soon difficult choices must be made and Indian policymakers should have enough self-confidence to make those decisions even when they go

against their long-held predilections. But a foreign policy that lacks intellectual and strategic coherence will ensure that India forever remains poised on the threshold of great-power status, not quite ready to cross over.

India's economic rise in the last few years presented opportunities that the nation's decision-makers have not adequately exploited or leveraged to their nation's advantage. It would indeed be a tragedy if history were to describe today's Indian policymakers in the words Winston Churchill applied to those who ignored the changing strategic realities before the Second World War: "They go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent." India today, more than any other time in its history, needs a view of its role in the world quite removed from the shibboleths of the past.

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