

Science education in dire straits

Improved quality emphasised by experts

THE state of science education in Bangladesh is not at all satisfactory and it needs a major overhauling to help us become competent enough to face the future world, which will have to depend on science to solve most of its problems. This is the overpowering concern that was expressed by eminent scientists and academics of the country at a roundtable conference on the subject held on Saturday. The experts were unanimous in their opinion that be it agriculture, climate change, health or education, a nation will have to have a good grasp of scientific knowledge to progress and prosper.

We note with discomfiture that there has been a gradual but steady decline in both quality and quantity in enrolment of students, teaching standard, laboratory condition and textbook content in the field of science education in Bangladesh. The slide has become noticeable in recent years when the number of students coming to study pure science subjects began to dwindle significantly and quality of teaching and curricula went from bad to worse. Statistics presented by the scholars show that while 1.26 lakh students appeared in HSC examination from science group in 2001, the number stood at 82, 199 in 2006. The situation in the case of B.Sc examination is more disconcerting as far as number is concerned.

The present science curriculum is not need-based and there is no coordination between SSC and HSC science curricula. Furthermore, we are quite surprised to learn that higher courses on mathematics are not compulsory for science students and that calculus is not included in HSC first year mathematics course, although it is an integral part of physics courses. The most significant aspect is allocation of meagre funds in the national budget for education. While UNESCO recommends a minimum allocation of 5 percent of the GDP to education sector, the actual allocation amounts to only 2.3 percent. It can be easily deduced how much of that amount ultimately trickles down to supporting science education.

The message that came out clear from the roundtable is that the government will have to formulate a pragmatic science policy and revive the Education Equipment Bureau that used to supply modern science equipment to educational institutes. Furthermore, it will have to take immediate measures to provide training to science teachers, furnish schools and colleges with laboratory equipment, offer better salary packages to science teachers and offer scholarships to meritorious students and organise programmes like science fair, science week, Math Olympiad etc. It needs no emphasising that to find our place among the developed nations of the world, we have to put science education at the top of the education policy.

Leasing out of closed jute mills

Renewal of contract should be subject to performance

WE feel that the government's plan to resuscitate five of the eight jute mills closed down during its watch is a worthwhile move. It makes good economic sense to reopen the closed state-owned jute mills - by leasing these out and giving their operating responsibility to private entrepreneurs.

It was a pity to see the decline and the near-moribund state of not only the jute mills, that were nationalised after liberation - but also of many of the state owned enterprises (SOEs), that had, instead of contributing to the state coffers, become a liability beyond the absorption capability of an economy like ours. The failure was not so much in the policy though as in its implementation.

The failure of the jute sector in Bangladesh had been made more poignant by the fact that whereas our jute mills were involved in the vanishing act, many new ones were appearing across our eastern border. One could engage in long analyses of how and why these factories ran up huge debts, but nobody should grudge the endeavour to restart them.

If our experience with the SOEs has been rather shocking, we can take hope from the performance of the private sector. The lessees must be commended for having taken up a great challenge by undertaking to turn a loss making concern into one of profit. Looking at the past performance of some of the lessees one feels quite confident that the derelict mills would once again be revived. Let's not forget, it is lease not a sell-out. The move should not be merely a transfer of real estate, and the retrenched workers should be the first to be absorbed as staff and workers.

One would hope that this would usher in the revival of the jute sector, and given the demand for goods made of natural fibre that are biodegradable, there is no reason why we cannot take our jute business on the path to ascendancy by making, among the many jute products, jute bags popular in the country and in international markets. In this context we would like to suggest that the government should formulate a vigorous market strategy, both for home and abroad, to make jute goods popular once again. The opportunity for jute products is unlimited - we have to seize it.

The histrionics of an 'uncompromising leader'



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

It was perhaps for the same reason that her lofty call for unity among the political forces to fight a commonly perceived opponent was ignored. Though the call is still alive, there are few positive responses -- again because of her inconsistency, Jamaat connection, hauteur, and irresistible ambition to be the only thread of scarlet in the drab fabric of politics.

ground earlier. Based on the track record of her governments, morality, ethics, and compassion are apparently alien to her chemistry, and thus unknown in BNP's political lexicon. She, however, had been fond of summing those beholden to her, and the message contained therein was clear: Do as I say and not as I do. Yet, the BNP crowd dutifully obliged her with their obeisance.

But, once fallen from grace, there are now cracks in the BNP monolith, and the party, without the binding glue of power, has visibly crumbled. Now, to re-establish her authority over the disparate groups of the party, she has to, perforce, assume the role of an "uncompromising leader" to sweep under the car-

pet many of her deficiencies.

It couldn't be more opportune for Madam Zia to indulge in an impolitic alacrity when her arch political rival Sheikh Hasina has been allowed by the government to undergo treatment abroad for her damaged ear and eye. In the meantime, the AL enjoys Hasina's green signal for its participation in the local body elections scheduled by the EC.

Sensing that BNP, torn by intra-party wrangling, is not election-worthy at the moment, the BNP supremo found it convenient to opt out of the elections, while criticising Sheikh Hasina for "entering a compromising deal with the government" -- although her party is participating in the poll in defi-

ance of her decision. The grass-roots workers perfectly well understand that the Madam, entangled in several indictments along with her sons and cronies, is simply trying to further brighten up her image as an "uncompromising leader" at their cost.

It was perhaps for the same reason that her lofty call for unity among the political forces to fight a commonly perceived opponent was ignored. Though the call is still alive, there are few positive responses -- again because of her inconsistency, Jamaat connection, hauteur, and irresistible ambition to be the only thread of scarlet in the drab fabric of politics.

In her politics of blowing hot and cold, Madam Zia is quite

capable of shifting from her unity proposal to assailing Sheikh Hasina within a matter of days by drawing comparison between the latter's present political move and 1986 political situation, where a united and revamped AL participated in parliamentary election under her leadership, although the party's victory was hijacked by Ershad's infamous media coup.

Even at that time, the BNP had the same image problem, emanating from rampant corruption and total break-down of the country's internal order.

Whatever may be the motive, the interim dispensation seems to be agreeable to also grant Khaleda Zia respite and reprieve similar to those given to Sheikh Hasina, although it is understood that the state of her illness, if any, does not warrant that. But Madam Zia seems to have been cleverly exploiting the gesture to bargain for release and treatment abroad of her indicted sons by raising undue hue and cry. She threatens to throw a spanner in the political process underway and even in

the forthcoming national election.

In the meantime, the madam's complacent secretary general, whose son is reported to have enjoyed similar facilities as those of Tareque and Koko in BSMU prison cell, is apparently fine. He has been spitting fire in defence of the honour of the Zia family, which he, like the BNP fraternity, thinks is under assault.

They all feel that the indictments leveled against the madam and her sons are aimed solely at damaging their honour. The madam even claimed that her sons couldn't commit any wrong. She also corrected the finance adviser by reminding him that to find the halcyon days it's enough for the people to look back to her regime.

The people, however, wonder if there is any more honour left in the Zia family for it to be capable of further damage. They also ask if the madam is conversant with history, although she is clearly endowed with quite a gift for histrionics.

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Rivers' ravage



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

Yearly bouts of river erosion with all the devastating consequences take heavy toll on the fragile economy of Bangladesh. Sadly, we have yielded to rivers' ravage in an era of technological supremacy, when most of the countries have successfully tamed their ferocious rivers using high technology. We also need to formulate a national river-bank policy for security of the lives and properties of the people living alongside the rivers.



Chapinawabganj and Muhuri in Feni are also eroding their banks on the Bangladesh side. According to a government estimate, the country has already lost nearly 15,000 hectares of its land due to erosion caused by 15 common rivers with India and Myanmar.

The border-rivers while changing their directions are eroding Bangladesh's land and adding it to India and Myanmar as the border runs along the middle of the border-rivers. The country's map set in 1974 after the India-Mujib border treaty, has now been changing as the authorities concerned have failed to take adequate measures to protect our territory from erosion. The Indian side of the rivers, however, is well bulwarked against erosion.

River erosion was not recognised as a natural calamity by our government until 1993, though erosion causes terrible havoc every year. Nearly 10 million people have become homeless and destitute in the northern districts of the country during the past 20 years. The number of river erosion victims who have become landless exceeded two million in greater Faridpur district alone.

Those who are rendered homeless and landless usually migrate to city slums. Some of them also shift to roadside shacks. They become day labourers, rickshaw pullers and beggars. Some, especially the young men and girls, get involved in anti-social activities for earning their livelihood. Some become carriers of drugs and smuggled goods. But there has not been any initiative either by the government or other organisations for their rehabilitation.

Ironically, the vast majority of river erosion victims do not get the support of Diluvion-Alluvion Act that was adopted on June 28, 1972 and amended in 1994, for helping the helpless victims of river erosion to get back their land lost by erosion. Only the powerful people and some touts are getting benefit of the Act in grabbing such lands in exchange of bribes to land-office men.

River erosion in riverine Bangladesh is a veritable curse, and a recurrent fact rather than a freak event. Human miseries due to river erosion are much deeper than from any other natural calamities, as the erosion victims lose their homes and croplands altogether.

According to available information, more than 250,000 people become victims of river erosion every year, and annual economic loss stands at Tk one thousand crore. An Asian Development Bank report says that river erosion makes at least one lakh people landless every year in Bangladesh.

Most alarming is that over 1,000 hectares of land are lost to rivers every year, in addition to 1% of total cultivable land for construction of houses and infrastructures. Only two rivers, the Jamuna and the Padma have engulfed 156,780 hectares of land since 1973, and 2,842 hectares of farmland are likely to disappear into these two rivers this year. The country will lose one-fourth of its total cultivable land by 2020 if we fail to check this.

At least 45 districts will face severe river erosion this year, and some 29,000 people living in the vicinity of the ferocious rivers are likely to lose their homesteads by erosion, said a government prediction report. Out of 48 lakh floating people in the country, 40 lakh are the victims of river erosion. The government has spent Tk 4,500 thousand crore during the last 35 years for containing river erosion, but achievement was quite meagre as most of the money was misused.

Yearly bouts of river erosion with all the devastating consequences take heavy toll on the fragile economy of Bangladesh. Sadly, we have yielded to rivers' ravage in an era of technological supremacy, when most of the countries have successfully tamed their ferocious rivers using high technology. We also need to formulate a national river-bank policy for security of the lives and properties of the people living alongside the rivers.

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How public is public opinion?



M. J. AKBAR

BYLINE

It would take a very inept government to lose a test on the floor of the House that it had sought. Dr Manmohan Singh has brought down his majority from over a hundred to perhaps five or less, but surely he could not have dragged it into negative territory. The real test, however, is not a contest for 272 MPs in this Parliament, but for 272 MPs in the next one. Politicians will decide the fate of the Congress in the coming days. Voters will decide its fate in the coming months.

ALL opinion is not public. This is one reason why public opinion polls so often get it wrong. Some sections of the Indian public -- generally, the less confident -- prefer to keep their views to themselves, partly out of a nagging fear that the establishment might react adversely to a hostile opinion. And partly out of a sense of property rights in a democracy: why should anyone else know what I think? Let them find out when they check the ballot box. Instead of leading the opinion pollster towards the broad truth, the voter might even deliberately mislead.

Many Indian Muslims, a minority that has learnt to maximise its democratic opportunities, have become sophisticated in the art of misleading

the establishment. In the absence of any direct communication with the grassroots, or the tea-stall, the establishment prefers to get its information through an intermediary class, the most prominent of which is the clergy.

Whenever political parties want to advertise "Muslim" support, they parade a queue of grey beards. Maulanas do have their place in Muslim society, a prominent one, but they are not the only determinants or mirrors of opinion. Their influence can be overestimated.

It is hardly a secret that some of the Indian clergy are sustained by the establishment and can be counted upon to echo whatever any government wants to hear. Very few of the

Maulanas-for-hire actually believe in the statements they make for Delhi's consumption. The rhetoric of the same Maulanas at the next Friday khutba (the sermon at Friday prayers) could easily be at great variance from their public posture a few days before.

Muslim voters, in any case, are not mechanical one-source consumers. They hear, they watch, they read but, most important, they remember. They are affected by their individual woes, but equally bear a strong sense of community. Television has made the world a village, and Iraq is as close to Kerala as Gujarat.

As Parliament gears up for a vote of confidence on the Congress-driven nuclear deal, evidence of base

realities is beginning to seep upwards. The virtual split in the Indian Union Muslim League over the deal tells its own story. On June 25, just a day before he died in Mumbai, G.M. Banatwala, then the party's national president, issued a press statement saying that the deal was not acceptable and that the party should oppose George Bush's "imperialism." He advised the Congress to "reconsider its decision." This, of course, was unpalatable to the establishment lobby within the IUM, led by E. Ahamed, who has done well as minister of state for external affairs in the UPA. He has the distinction of being the first Muslim League minister in Delhi since 1947.

The pro-government section of

the party, therefore, has a vested interest in supporting what the Congress orders it to do, and will ratchet up the usual list of advantages and alibis in defence of its alliance with the Congress. But there was strong resistance when the deal was discussed at a three-hour meeting of the party in Mallapuram on July 10. The compromise that emerged was a typical fudge: the party would vote for the government, not the deal, and would convey Muslim anxiety to Congress president Sonia Gandhi. "The Muslim community is worried about the deal," said Panakkad Syed Muhammadali Shihab Thangal, president of the Kerala unit.

The Muslim League has rivals for the space it has acquired in the Malayali Muslim's affections. The most notable competitor is the People's Democratic Party, led by Abdul Nazar Madani. Madani publicly castigated the League and added: "The Muslim community across the world has been facing atrocities sponsored by the United States. The deal with an anti-Muslim country should have been opposed by the IUM."

The CPI(M), which would like nothing better than to crack open the

hold that the League traditionally has over the Muslim vote in Kerala, has accused the IUM of being loyal to American imperialism, adding for good measure that the Congress was in collusion with America, which had killed Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine.

Like all other voters Indian Muslims too are influenced by both regional and national issues: the Muslim League's views in Kerala do not impact on the way Muslims vote in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. But on national and international issues there is a clear majority view across the states. The nuclear deal is both a national and an international issue, and it is only logical that national and international realities will enter the argument.

The only point being consistently hammered by Congress, Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and the IUM in order to change Muslim sentiment is the spectre of BJP in all its manifestations. Let us look at the list.

At the top is the statement that if you oppose the deal it will help communal forces, in that it will enable the BJP to come to power. Does this mean that the Congress and UPA have already conceded defeat in a future election? I thought the

Congress believed that the nuclear deal would be an election-winner, sweeping up votes with every clause. In fact, instead of searching for a harrowing and narrow victory in Parliament, the Congress should have had the confidence to go the people and been vindicated by their support. The Congress did not have the courage to do so because it does not believe the deal to be a vote-winner. If the BJP-led NDA wins, it will not be because of the deal, but because of the mismanagement of the nation over four years.

Second: the Congress tried desperately to get BJP support for the deal, and is still propping up former national security adviser Brajesh Mishra in order to try and break BJP unity. Would the deal or the Congress have become communal if the BJP had supported it?

The most lurid accusation is charging the CPI(M) with supporting "communal" forces because it opposes the deal. The Congress has a very convenient memory. The last time that a government was defeated on the floor of the House, the Congress and the BJP voted together -- to bring down the VP Singh government. Did that make Congress, and Rajiv Gandhi, who was leader of

the party then, communal?

During the term of the VP Singh government the Marxists and the BJP were allies, supporting Singh. They had weekly dinners, from which Harkishan Surjeet and L.K. Advani would emerge, smiling and laughing for the cameras. Did that make Surjeet communal? Why should Prakash Karat become communal because he is against the nuclear deal, for reasons, incidentally, different from the BJP? You have to be very arid, mentally, and believe as well that Indian politicians and voters have nothing called a memory chip in their brains in order to market such logic.

It would take a very inept government to lose a test on the floor of the House that it had sought. Dr Manmohan Singh has brought down his majority from over a hundred to perhaps five or less, but surely he could not have dragged it into negative territory. The real test, however, is not a contest for 272 MPs in this Parliament, but for 272 MPs in the next one. Politicians will decide the fate of the Congress in the coming days. Voters will decide its fate in the coming months.

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