

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'Parliament should not be controlled by the prime minister or ministers'

Former veteran student leader **Abdur Razzak** is a presidium member of Awami League (AL). He was elected member of parliament in 1973, 1991, 1996 and 2001. He was also elected a member of East Pakistan Provincial Council in 1970. He played a vital role in education movement in 1962 and six-point movement in 1966. He served the party as general secretary in two terms from 1978 to 1981 and 1981 to 1983. Razzak revived Baksal in 1982, but returned to the AL in 1991. He was one of the leaders of Mujib Bahini during liberation war. He was also the president of Dhaka Mohammedan Sporting Club. He served as a minister from 1996 to 2001. **Shariful Islam** and **Hasan Jahid Tusher** took the interview.

What are you thinking about election?

There is no alternative to democracy, and to give it a permanent shape there is no alternative to election. The election must be held on the declared date as there are a lot of doubts about it. So, the government should declare poll schedule to create an electoral environment.

You are saying that there are doubts over election. What are the reasons?

Firstly there is no consistency in the statements being made by the government and the Election Commission; secondly, they are shifting from their statements frequently. If they made the statements after having discussion among themselves it would have been better. Thirdly, some political parties who, according to newspaper reports, are trying to foil the election are also creating doubts among the people.

Do you have any doubts over participation of any party?

Even a few days back some political parties took a tough stance over registration with the Election Commission. They have backtracked from that stance which is a positive sign. We hope they will participate in the election and make it meaningful.

What will be the consequence if the election is not held?

The election must be held on December 18. No chance should be given for creation of doubt. If the election is not held, the government and those who are assisting the government will be held responsible.

Is AL prepared for the election?

We are prepared for the election. We have done many electoral activities in advance, so that we can complete every preparation within a week after our party chief's return.

What will be your stand if the election is held under emergency?

I've already said the election should be held after withdrawing the state of emergency to make it free, fair and transparent.

If the government does not withdraw the emergency?

I think the government is not in that position.

What about AL's election manifesto?

We will improve the manifesto that we prepared in 2006. We will give emphasis on the youth who have enrolled as voters and try to give a solution to their problems.

What about forging a grand alliance?

We have 14-party alliance, which is the key electoral base. Besides, we will look for a forming a grand alliance.

What is the necessity of forming a

grand alliance now?

A fair political environment could prevail if AL and BNP participate in the election individually. But, BNP has formed electoral coalition with a force that was against the independence of the country. AL and BNP would have been established as two major political parties if BNP took part in election individually and the party of the criminals would drop out. Left alliance would also take their politics forward.

Does AL alone fear BNP-Jamaat coalition in the election?

It is not a question of fear. AL could participate alone, but as a component of 14-party it took part in movements for a long time. So, we are participating the election as 14-party alliance.

Why you are forming an alliance with former dictator Ershad?

When he was dictator, we had waged movement against him and ousted him. Now he has learnt from the past and if he wants to come to the democratic system and agrees that democratically elected government is government of the people then we have no dispute with him.

Apart from Ershad who is coming with you in the grand alliance?

It has not been finalised yet. We are keeping contact with different parties.

What will be Awami League's

position in keeping those convicted in lower court, or corrupt suspects or patrons of criminals away from election?

Such kind of people in Awami League are very limited, and although there were one or two they had no influence in the party. If there is no political motive behind filing the cases, why have they been filed against Awami League leaders and workers now when they were not filed in the five-year tenure of the previous government? They failed to prove that leaders of Awami League resorted to corruption or misdeeds in last five years. I think cases have been filed against Sheikh Hasina and other leaders in a bid to victimise them politically.

Do you think that politics will see a qualitative change after the elections?

Certainly. Political infertility will come to an end. It will be a strong step to give democracy a permanent shape. We will make the parliament effective, taking lesson from the mistakes we made in the past. And the parliament will be the key place of all political activities.

How will the parliament be made effective when political parties boycott it?

The culture of boycott needs to be stopped. All political parties need to free themselves from the bad culture of boycotting parliament. Besides, the legislature also needs to be free from administration. It also must be ensured that the activities in the parliament are not controlled by the prime minister or other ministers. In that case the speaker will hold all power and he must be independent and impartial. A balance of power can be brought by electing the speaker from the ruling party and deputy speaker from the opposition.

Will Awami League follow the

practice?

We are determined to follow the practice. Sheikh Hasina had a meeting with us on the issue in the past and she emphasised on making the parliament effective. Moreover, it is also included in our 23-point charter.

What is your evaluation of the 1/11 changeover? Is there any lesson that the politicians can learn from 1/11?

Political parties have nothing to learn as the government used 1/11 to weigh all in a single scale. Today it has been proved that different kinds of charges have been brought against a party to victimise it politically. So there is nothing to get lesson from it. Secondly, they have done some good work according to our reforms proposals placed before the countrymen by Sheikh Hasina. Among those, there was a proposal for a voter list with photographs, and they have completed it. They have also implemented the demand of using transparent ballot boxes. Though they have separated the judiciary, it has not been implemented fully. These are really good initiatives. They also tried to make the Election Commission neutral and independent. But it will have to be given its right to work independently and according to its laws. They have also reformed the PSC. These are good jobs by the government. It will be another milestone if the government gives back the people's right to them through holding a free, fair and credible election.

Will you continue reform activities and anti-corruption drive if voted to power?

Certainly. We never closed any ongoing project that the previous BNP-Jamaat coalition government had started, though they had closed many of our regime's good projects immediately after assuming office. We always try to take forward any positive works.

What is your opinion about the minus-two theory?

It was not right. No one has the right to minus anybody forcibly. It is the people who can minus. But that will happen through people's vote. It is out of the question to minus Sheikh Hasina as she forged movements in favour of the people and spoke in favour of them. So why is there the question to make her minus?

Should dialogue be held between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia?

The people cannot accept the process by which the two leaders have been weighed on a same scale. In that case they, whether in government and opposition, they should hold talks frequently for the interest of the country and its people. We can accept that.

There are some negative opinions among the public about the four-senior leaders including you, who placed separate reforms proposals to exclude party president Sheikh Hasina.

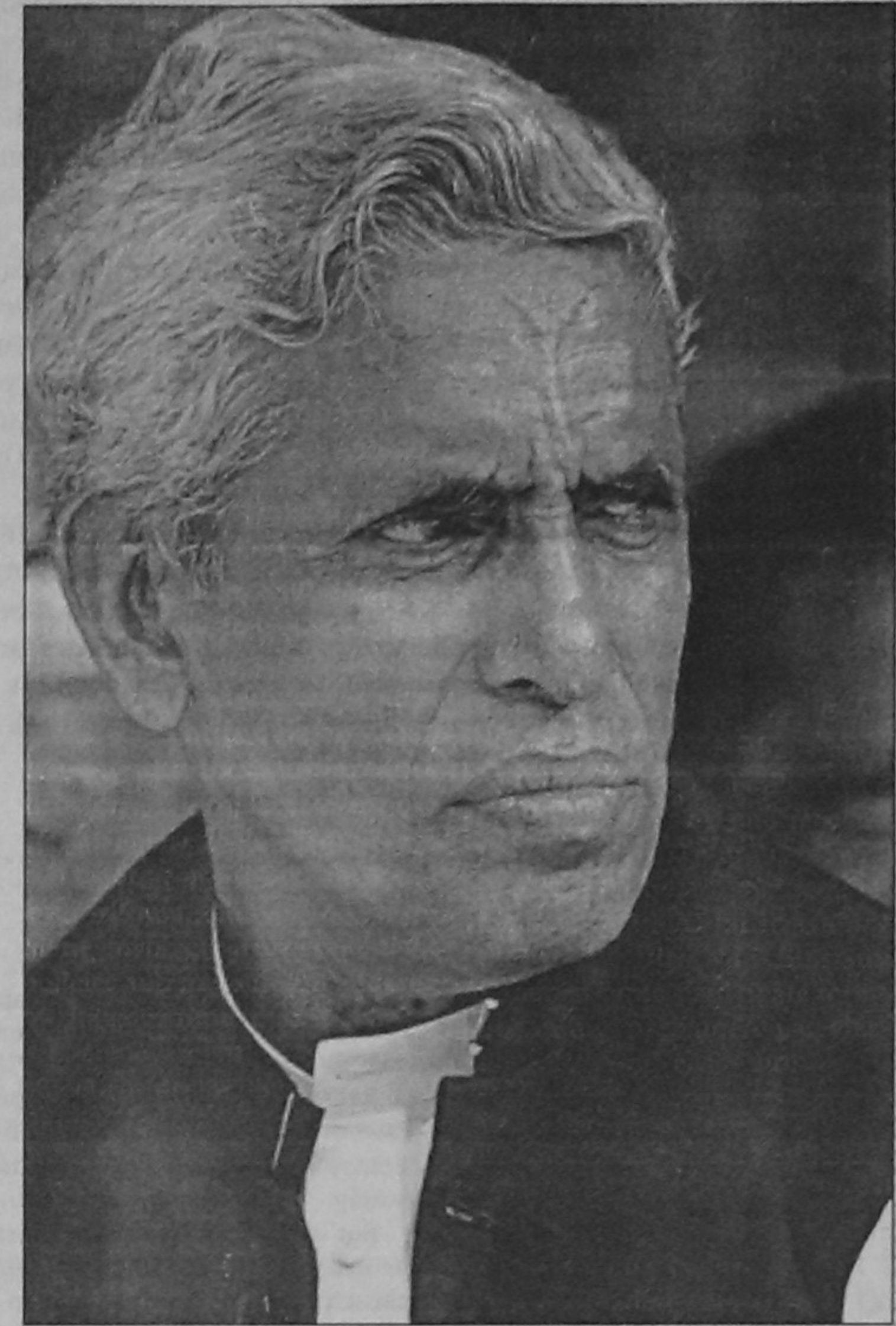
There were no words, even by mistake, to exclude Sheikh Hasina and some others in the reform proposals that I gave earlier. Whatever we had said we said on the basis of our 23-point reform proposals.

You mentioned power balance between president and prime minister in your reform proposal, do you still think so?

It is not possible now. No one can do it forcibly. Parliament will decide on the matter.

You also said that an individual cannot simultaneously hold a party and a governmental position, what do you think now about your proposals?

Sheikh Hasina herself also said that. It's not time to review this question. Election will be held, government will be formed, and then party council will be held and many things will be discussed there.



Abdur Razzak

Do you stick to the reform proposals you placed earlier?

The EC has implemented most of our reform proposals. So our demands have been met.

How do you consider the foreign diplomat's interference in our country's politics?

Since we give them the chance, the foreigners can interfere. I agree that there should not be any interference in our internal matters, but if anyone supports us in principle about establish-

ment of democracy, then it is acceptable.

What do you think could be the post election situation, and can we expect an end to hostility-based politics this time?

We will hope for the best. We will have to establish democratic practice and make parliament effective and independent, then we can hope that. But a certain political party wants to create a violent situation with the use of religion and religious sentiment.

A good start for Jamaat but problems remain

Religion has always been, and will remain, an important part of the social life of the people in Bangladesh. Apart from its spiritual aspect, religion can play a significant role in the social life in any society provided religious principles and tenets are applied properly, and without serving a hidden and narrow political agenda of any political party.

ABDUL QUADER

NEWSPAPER reports suggest that Jamaat-e-Islami has recognised the historic liberation war of Bangladesh in its newly revised party constitution (The Daily Star, October 21). This was in line with the requirements of the amended Representation of the People Order (RPO), which envisages that the constitution of a political party cannot be incompatible with the provisions and spirit of the Bangladesh constitution.

An interesting provision of the newly revised Jamaat's constitution is that non-Muslims will be allowed to become members of

the party. However, there remains a discriminatory element in this provision, which states that a non-Muslim member must take an oath to protect the country's independence and sovereignty (but a Muslim member is not required to take the oath).

I consider that this goes against the fundamental spirit of equality and fairness espoused in the religion of Islam. Non-discrimination is considered as the first principle of justice.

The preamble to the Jamaat's new constitution states that the party "will work to establish an Islamic social system that guarantees justice for all, since Bangladesh emerged as the third

largest Muslim country through a heroic battle of the people and freedom fighters." In my view, this statement in the preamble is a misrepresentation of historical facts.

In 1971, the people of Bangladesh fought for freedom and independence from the clutches of the oppressive political and military regime of Pakistan. And there was a long political and historical background against which the liberation war started. The spirit of the liberation war was overwhelmingly dictated by an urge to achieve an independent and sovereign country that would provide equal opportunity for all

to develop and prosper economically, socially and culturally.

While the majority of people in the former East Pakistan were Muslims, religion did not play any role in the quest for freedom and independence. People did not consciously fight for a land to make it "the third largest Muslim country in the world."

I believe any deliberate attempt by Jamaat to play the religion card in interpreting the historical context of the liberation war of Bangladesh will be counter-productive. If Jamaat is really sincere and honest in its avowed principle of establishing "an Islamic social system that guarantees justice for all," it should remove the provision of requiring non-Muslim members to take an oath, which the Muslim members don't need to take. However, the question remains whether non-Muslims will be interested in becoming members of Jamaat-e-Islami in the first place.

As regards the Islamic social

system based on justice, a political party can do a number of things to promote social justice, and this does not require political power (ie, forming a government or being part of a coalition). It is the social power that can make a big difference. The success of the Grameen Bank is a case in point in this regard. This organisation did not require political power to promote and establish social justice in the form of poverty reduction, especially among the women.

The Grameen Bank has made a remarkable contribution to economic and social emancipation of a large section of the community, and by doing so it has served the purpose of social justice in a broader context.

Jamaat can do justice to itself if it can promote the importance of rule of law, democracy and equal treatment to all in social behaviour and actions among its own constituencies. It will benefit from being viewed as a role model by

sections in the community to the effect that it does what it preaches. Of course, this applies to all political parties. The constitution of a party consists of a set of words only. These words need to be translated into credible action to prove that the party really means business.

Religion has always been, and will remain, an important part of the social life of the people in Bangladesh. Apart from its spiritual aspect, religion can play a significant role in the social life in any society provided religious principles and tenets are applied properly, and without serving a hidden and narrow political agenda of any political party.

The alarming moral degradation that has gripped almost all spheres of life in Bangladesh has caused tremendous damage to the capability of state machinery to bring about any real welfare for the people on a sustainable basis. The much talked-about justice and fairness have fled away from

the country. Perhaps a social movement is required to improve the current situation on an incremental basis. As a party with a significant supporter base, Jamaat can play a prominent role in this regard if it wants to.

To teach a person "not to lie, not to steal and not to cause harm to others" does not require a political party to be in government. It requires moral teachings and inculcation of ethical behaviour, which could be based on Islamic and other religious beliefs and values.

As social institutions, political parties can help develop social systems with the right incentive structures at local level to achieve certain social goals. Many things can be done at private and social level without getting the government involved. However, right policies and measures, if adopted by the government, can facilitate the achievement of goals and objectives desired by social institutions.

It is said "charity begins at home." Similarly, moral and ethical education begins at home and parents have a part in this. On a larger scale, social institutions such as political parties can play their part as well. And here comes the Jamaat-e-Islami with its declared religious mission and zeal to establish a fair and just society. Fairness and justice are based, among other things, on true moral and ethical behaviour and actions. Those who preach this fairness and justice must act first to gain credibility and trust from the people.

It remains to be seen if the recent changes in Jamaat's party constitution reflect its realisation of its past mistakes and recognition of new reality, or just a reactionary gesture to the requirements of the RPO for registering the party with the Election Commission to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Time will tell for sure.

Abdul Quader writes from Canberra.

Science education declines in the Age of Science

Renowned writers, intellectuals and teachers commented: "One needs private coaching to study science in our country. Only the affluent can afford it because it is expensive. Commerce, on the other hand, is a lot easier to study and to get good marks in. One can get into BBA program, which has a lot of job opportunities. These are the causes of declining science education."

MD. MASUM BILLAH

WE are living in the age in which tremendous scientific developments have taken place. When and where this onward march will stop is unknown to us. To adapt to this situation, we need to produce science graduates and a galaxy of experts in different branches of science, but the number of science students is getting smaller every year.

In 1990, 28.13% of the HSC examinee were science students. This year there were 19.41%. In 1990, 42.21% of SSC examinees

were science students, while this year it was 23.76%. In many schools and colleges where science is taught the standard is poor because of the lack of laboratory facilities and competent teachers.

In the 1970s and '80s a large number of students studied science. Their aim was to study medicine, but the medical colleges could not accommodate them because of the limited number of seats. As a result, students studied general science, where they had to face tough competition.

Then they opted for arts in general universities because the number of seats for science stu-

dents was limited (25%). The students of arts group with normal second class got into those departments easily and the departments welcomed first division holders. This caused disinclination towards studying science.

I remember, among the students of the English department in my time, all except one were from the science group. Even the Bengali department got all the students from the science group. We failed to address this problem pragmatically and reward and evaluate science students.

A student of science cannot manage a scholarship even after



Students line-up for admission. How many will take Science?

getting 78% marks, whereas only 60% holders in arts gets scholarship easily. As the brighter students join the science group, the number of scholarships for them should definitely be increased.

Students think that studying science means becoming a doctor,

or engineer or agriculturist. Other branches of science hardly appeal to them. Medical colleges and engineering universities and institutes admit only the brilliant students.

The urban and most sophisticated rural areas produce science

students. Normal or ordinary students hardly study science, which entails financial involvement, and extra teachers or coaching. Most rural students cannot afford this.

Alarmed at the decline of the quality of science education and students' enrolment, scientists and educationists of the country stressed the need for persuading the government to allocate a larger budget for the sector to enhance teachers' capacity and update the curricula. Science textbooks need to be simplified, teachers' salaries need to be raised, and science graduates need to be motivated to become teachers.

They suggested introduction of a terrestrial television channel dedicated to broadcasting education programs to help both teachers and students by reducing students' dependence on coaching centres. This is a very good idea.

Scientists identified weak curriculum and textbooks, weak

teaching and assessment methods, lack of properly trained teachers and laboratory facilities, poor salaries of the teachers, and students' declining interest as some of the main reasons for qualitative and quantitative decline of science education. They underscored the need for recruiting quality teachers and building capacity of the existing ones through tele-education using ICT based materials for resuming the government's stalled Ph.D program and for organising science weeks and science fairs.

Renowned writers, intellectuals and teachers commented: "One needs private coaching to study science in our country. Only the affluent can afford it because it is expensive. Commerce, on the other hand, is a lot easier to study and to get good marks in. One can get into BBA program, which has a lot of job opportunities. These are the causes of declining science education."

Dr. Zafar Iqbal, eminent writer and educationist, said: "Science

materials are terrible in the country." Prof. Shamsur Ali said: "The textbooks fail to fire a spirit of enquiry." Dr. Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, vice-chancellor of Brac University said: "National budget allocation for education in 2004 was only 2.3% of GDP whereas Unesco recommends minimum 5%. Mahfuz Anam, editor of The Daily Star, stressed the need for bringing back science education to the mainstream, and suggested holding of a national science convention and similar events at district level.

It is the imperative to form a national committee comprising of these people, and to conduct a "need assessment" throughout the country, keeping in consideration the rural and urban context. Science education must be popularised and the young learners equipped to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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