

Admission crisis at Dhaka University

Teachers must uphold standards of excellence

It was a matter of the deepest shame when a group of students, all seeking admission to first year honours classes at Dhaka University, recently vandalised the office of the vice chancellor to push their demand for a relaxation of admission rules. Indeed, the incident took place in the presence of the vice chancellor himself, which was clearly a sign of the limits these admission seekers were ready to go in order to make themselves heard. Such behaviour on the part of the young, indeed on the part of anyone for that matter, calls for stringent disciplinary action. Unfortunately, though, not only has action not been taken; but now a group of teachers known as the white panel at Dhaka University have echoed the demands of these admission seekers. Something of disbelief comes with such action on the part of the teachers. It is these very teachers who were earlier involved with finalising the admission procedures. In an about turn, they have now warned the vice chancellor that unless the rules are relaxed, they will have nothing to do with the admission process this year. There is certain whiff of an attempt to politicise matters here. If that is the case, it will be most unhealthy.

It all raises the question of how such action, on the part of students and teachers, undermines the quality of education we would like to be promoted and upheld at Dhaka University. There can be little argument that when a number of departments, among which are English, Bengali, International Relations, Mass Communication and Journalism and Women and Gender Studies, decided that those seeking admission to them must have obtained high marks in English and Bengali at HSC, the focus was on quality. The teachers of DU, including the eleven deans, agreed. Now nine of the deans (and they belong to the white panel) have reversed themselves along with a number of other teachers to demand a watering down of the rules. If the university acquiesces to such a demand, it will be most unfortunate. In fact, we are flabbergasted that such a demand has been made at all. We along with the rest of the country have always believed that education is much more than coming by a certificate. It is preparing a young man or woman for life, to enable him or her to develop a worldview. That being the case, we condemn the pressure now being applied over the DU admission process.

Education must never be discriminatory. But where such discrimination is suspected there are procedures to handle the issue. The bigger worry, though, is whether in order to accommodate a few individuals in the classroom universities must bend the rules. If that comes to pass, all that we can look forward to in university education is mediocrity and worse. We hope the teachers of Dhaka University will realise the risks involved with their demands. A show of force in an institution of higher learning is always counter-productive. Let our teachers rise to the occasion through reaching a fruitful solution to the crisis, without in any way compromising the high standards of teaching and learning Dhaka University has always set store by.

Hand Washing Day, a brilliant idea

Let it not be confined to a day only

SOMETIMES a simple event can have a ground breaking significance. In this category belongs the news of 15 million children in 75,000 schools in Bangladesh washing their hands to mark the first-ever Global Hand Washing Day launched by the Unicef. Children are most vulnerable to pollution; besides, a good habit formed at a tender, impressionable age, can be an enduring acquisition for life.

This year's theme 'clean hands save lives' is very apt. Though not usually realised, hands are about the most exposed and thus unclean parts of the body. These are filled with invisible bacteria, and unless cleansed properly before eating, they do pose grave risk to our health, especially in our context of increasing environmental pollution, both surface and air. Actually, the casual manner in which many people throughout the world wipe their hands, would make out a case for a vigorous cross-country hygienic sensitisation drive.

The risk is higher among the children because their immunities are in a very fledgling state.

Merely soaking hands with water is no good; it may even leave them soiled. There are standard hand washing techniques which the children must be able to learn and practise under the wings of their parents and teachers. The whole community needs to be galvanised behind a campaign launched for improved hygiene and sanitation practices in the country.

No doubt, the hand washing lessons taken by school goes throughout the country made for a spectacular event. But it would be nothing more than a one-off, quickly forgotten ritual unless it is sustained through programmatic efforts made by the school boards, relevant NGOs and local community leaderships.

The education and health ministries could make it a common cause of providing whatever little logistical support is needed to popularise hand washing across the country. The media, both electronic and print, should be utilised in advancing such a benign cause.

United States and the Islamic world

POST BREAKFAST

There are more than 500 million Muslims within the South Asian framework that stretches from Afghanistan to Bangladesh. There have also been significant changes in the political governance structure in some of these countries. There is also the presence of more than eight million expatriate Muslims from this region in the work force of Gulf Cooperation Council countries. From that point of view, it would make sense to open the doors and windows of constructive engagement between this region and the United States.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

SINCE 11 September, 2001, popularly known as 9/11, there has been a growing interest in the United States in trying to understand the existing dynamics within the Islamic world. Before that date US policy makers and think tanks displayed some interest in the evolving peace process in the Middle East and the question of finding an acceptable solution to the Palestinian problem, but that was marginal compared to their careful monitoring of economic and trade potentials in the energy-rich member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

This limited approach changed not only with the breaking out of war in Afghanistan and the unilateral engagement in Iraq but also with the emergence of Iran as a regional power. This expanded the areas of interaction and broadened the US function within the matrix of international relations with countries with substantial Muslim populations.

It is this awareness that has led the United States to establish a dialogue with key leaders in the field of politics, business, media, academia and civil society from across the Muslim world. The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, Washington, the Asia Foundation and the Georgetown University, Washington have been particularly involved in this process of arriving at a positive commitment.

The stakeholders within this equation meet as a Forum in Doha, Qatar every year. This has provided a platform to address several critical issues dividing the United States and countries with large Muslim populations. This Forum, within its format, tries to address the factors that affect perception in the Islamic world about US initiatives.

Today, within the USA and in many other developed countries, there is a belief that a link exists between Islam and terrorism. Despite having 8 million Muslims within its borders, and Islam being the fastest growing religion in the United States, general people over there have demonstrated their bias and suspicion about Islam and Muslims through their speculation about Democratic presidential candidate Obama. This situation deteriorated sufficiently to persuade former secretary of state Colin Powell, a Republican, to reprimand those (within his Party) who were associated with such negative publicity.

While endorsing Obama, Powell according to the BBC, pointedly remarked: "He's not a Muslim, he's a Christian, he's always been a Christian, but the right answer is, What if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this

country? The answer is 'No,' that's not America." I believe that this courageous assertion by Powell has added to the image of the United States within the Islamic world.

Over the past few years one thing has become very clear. It is undeniable that there are several challenges facing the relationship between the USA and the Muslim world. It is also accepted that we can arrive at satisfactory solutions on the basis of dialogue and consultation. In a manner of speaking, this reminds me of English poet John Milton's observation in Aeropagetica that "discussion is knowledge in the making." It is significant that the Brookings Project is attempting just that. It is becoming a prime mover in reducing miscommunication.

The USA, Canada and the European Union have traditionally reached out towards meaningful discussion only with countries situated around the Mediterranean rim. This focus on weighted West Asian participation unfortunately excluded interaction with Muslim countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia, two regions with a combined Muslim population nearing 900 million. This, over time, created a serious handicap in approaching issues and finding solutions from a holistic viewpoint.

As such, it was indeed a pleasure to be invited recently to participate and moderate one of the many sessions at the US-Islamic World Regional Forum convened in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Organised by Brookings and supported by the Asia Foundation and the Malaysian Institute of Strategic and International Studies, it opened with an interesting keynote address by Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

His statement appreciated the ongoing dialogue but also drew attention to comments made by certain cynics that such "dialogues are held to deflect attention from the continuing problems in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories."

Participated by eminent scholars and civil society activists from the USA, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar the UAE, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, India, Pakistan and myself from Bangladesh, the Conference address interesting issues associated with security, socio-economic development, the need to expand the opportunity of secular education within a Muslim environment and also the important role of the media in finding solutions.

Participants candidly discussed about religion and politics, under-

standing the role of religion within the environment of Southeast and South Asia, the impact of religion on governance, the complex facets related to development and reform in Muslim society, trade and investment and the factors associated with human development and social change. The discussions were held in a friendly and open atmosphere (normally missing in dialogues that have religion as an ingredient). As a result, many agreed to disagree on certain aspects. However, least common denominators were identified for moving the process forward in an effective manner.

It was clear from the presentation of papers and views expressed by the Muslim scholars, journalists and civil society activists that there was a nagging worry about some of the "sweeping negative imaging in parts of the West" about Muslims and the alleged absence of human rights, gender discrimination, backwardness, extremism and poor governance. The Malaysians for their part, and me, on behalf of Bangladesh, pointed out that both in Southeast Asia as well as in South Asia, significant progress had been achieved in promoting equal opportunities for different communities, gender empowerment through extension of micro-credit and promoting informal education.

All these steps, it was underlined, were helping in the growth of a participatory democratic process. Participants were able to share views, exchange ideas, clarify questions and discuss issues through frank dialogue. This was important not only in fostering goodwill between the USA and representatives from South and Southeast Asia but also in sharing of information within the two regions as regards their respective Islamic identities.

The challenge that the Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World faces in the future is the giving of concrete substance to

some of the innovative ideas that were proposed during the course of the plenaries and task forces in this Forum.

It has been a good idea to convene such a meeting in Southeast Asia. However, it would be important for this process to convene a similar Forum in South Asia. There have been important developments in the past few years and, according to some, greater Middle East now includes parts of South Asia. There are more than 500 million Muslims within the South Asian framework that stretches from Afghanistan to Bangladesh.

There have also been significant changes in the political governance structure in some of these countries. There is also the presence of more than eight million expatriate Muslims from this region in the work force of Gulf Cooperation Council countries. From that point of view, it would make sense to open the doors and windows of constructive engagement between this region and the United States.

The organisers have apparently decided that in the next few months, the Project on US Relations with the Islamic World will be launching a brand new website entitled The Doha Network. We hope it will become an online platform for continued dialogue and networking; publication of reports, multimedia and outreach.

It would also be useful for Brookings to establish contact with the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Secretariat in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and to interface with this Institution. This could then be the vehicle for subsequent association with Muslim countries in Africa. Expansion of the framework will help to pioneer understanding and remove mutual suspicion.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

Distressed Indian society

BETWEEN THE LINES

Parochial politics apart, India has always prided itself with occupying a central space. It was neither black nor white, but there was a grey area which people expanded to promote pluralism. That space, the centre, has been eroding for some years. It was Nehruvian in concept but stayed more or less intact even in the BJP's Atal Behari Vajpayee era till chief minister Narendra Modi came to the scene with his policy of ethnic cleansing.



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

I have never found Indian civil society so much in despair as it is today. It feels insecure as if everything around is falling apart. The real concern is over violence which has spread in the country in one shape or the other. Incidents are not many but they do scare the society which has been living more or less peacefully till some time ago.

No doubt, the financial meltdown has evoked fears. They may be exaggerated because, apart from a crash in the share market, the economy is weathering the storm well. No employee has been laid off in any company worth the name. No call centre has been closed. But since America, the highest priest of globalisation, is shaky, the general impression is that it is only a matter of time when Washington's illness would visit India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's assurance that banks and deposits with them are safe has helped - only a bit.

The reason is that neither Manmohan Singh nor Finance Minister P. Chidambaram nor Deputy Chairman Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia is seen as an answer

to the problem. Their erudition in economics is recognised but their mantra of "free economy" which helps the upper half is not popular. People feel that what has saved them is lack of economic reforms, not opening many sectors to foreign investors.

However, the main anxiety is the political scene which is riven with sharp differences over religious identities and political ideologies. What has really shaken the society is the continuing violence against Christians. Embarrassed and uncomfortable as it is over the treatment meted out to Muslims, the society has begun to live with it. But the atrocities against the Christians have put a question mark against India's secular credentials, particularly when democracies in the West have accepted it as one of them.

Some 18 leading Indian writers, including Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth and Girish Karnad, have expressed anguish at the continuing brutalities visited

upon the Christian community and places of worship in Orissa and Karnataka. "Eventually," the writers say, "such violence does not remain confined to a few clearly targeted victims. Rather, it spreads to engulf and destroy the entire society that spawns it, as is evident in the neighbouring Pakistan and Sri Lanka, for instance."

On the other hand, the demand for a judicial inquiry into the encounter in the Jamia area in New Delhi has been taken up even by the Congress Muslim leaders. The incident has, in fact, become the community's joint demand throughout the country. The central government, I believe, is having the reports by different non-Muslim teams examined by a top legal expert because its stand so far has been that any government inquiry would demoralise the police.

Whether this happens or not is a matter of discussion. But the "encounter" in the Jamia area and the killing of Christians in Orissa and Karnataka will definitely eat into the

Congress vote in the forthcoming state elections, if not in parliamentary polls. There is a rash of meetings and seminars in a few big cities to draw the Manmohan Singh government's attention to the insipidity of minorities.

I expected some consensus to emerge from the last week's meeting of the National Integration Council, representing all political parties. But they could not even agree on what posed the threat: communalism or terrorism. Ultimately, the common word found was "communal violence." But there was no togetherness even when the country faced a grave danger from the fissiparous elements.

The BJP is busy stoking fires of division. It is against any inquiry into the incident at the Jamia area and equally adamant over any action against its militant wing, Bajrang Dal, which is responsible for the killing of Christians and burning of churches in Orissa.

In Mumbai, the division has taken the shape of regional chauvinism. A goonda, Raj Thackeray, nephew of Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray, has raised the old slogan of "Maharashtra for Maharashtrians." Not long ago he attacked the Bihar labour working in the city. This week he disrupted the railway board examination centres because some north Indian candidates were appearing. With great reluctance, the Congress-led state government has arrested Raj Thackeray who has been lionised by certain elements within the Congress.

Whatever message Raj Thackeray's activities may give, it casts a shadow

on governance. The very federal structure which has held the different states together comes to be questioned. The intelligentsia has begun to wonder about the idea of India. The centre looks weak and the states under the thumb of political overlords.

Parochial politics apart, India has always prided itself with occupying a central space. It was neither black nor white, but there was a grey area which people expanded to promote pluralism. That space, the centre, has been eroding for some years. It was Nehruvian in concept but stayed more or less intact even in the BJP's Atal Behari Vajpayee era till chief minister Narendra Modi came to the scene with his policy of ethnic cleansing.

What the BJP or the new strategists in the Congress do not realise is that secularism, the ideal of "unity in diversity," is India's destiny. Tolerance and the spirit of accommodation provide the glue. Let it not get dry. Let the world know that India has not swerved from the path it chose even before independence, not to mix religion with politics.

The spirit of freedom struggle days made the then ruling Congress stay centre and adopt a constitution which was secular in letter and spirit. Mahatma Gandhi's sacrifice stopped the anti-Muslim torrent which followed in the wake of the partition. Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and even Indira Gandhi refused to be pushed by communal forces. Why is the dithering now?

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

OPINION

South Talpatti-New Moore dispute

ABDUS SATTA MOLLA

AFTER 28 years our big neighbour India extended her hands in discussing maritime boundary inclusive of the South Talpatti vs. New Moore island issue. But the outcome was only 'diplomatically successful', in actuality it was just a failure.

Bangladesh is encircled by India on three sides. We have anthropologically the same origin, have the state languages (Bangla and Hindi) derived from the same Sanskrit roots, were governed by Britishers together for 190 years, partitioned in 1947 based only on religion, and during our Liberation War in 1971, she generously helped us in very many ways for which our nation is grateful.

However, all are not going well between tiny Bangladesh and big India - the largest democracy in the world. Let us call a spade a spade.

Although Bangladesh instantly completed the handover of enclaves to India following Indira-Mujib accord of 1974, India did that late in 1992, yet partially. Still in the border area, there is frequent intrusion and killing of our nationals because they sometimes need to enter into the 'no man's land' for some obvious reasons (they have relatives and even members of the same family on two sides of the unnatural politically-placed border).

The case of the newly formed island in the bordering river Hariabhangha's estuary is being dealt with by India on the same way. According to Radcliffe plan, the aquatic demarcation line in between the two sovereign countries is the deepest part of the river bed. The island in question was formed as a delta, by definition, having two streams of the river flowing by two sides of the island under formation.

Now the question is which channel the western or the eastern to the island is the main stream. Bangladesh claims that the main stream is the western one, so the island belongs to Bangladesh and she duly named it South Talpatti since she has a northern Talpatti along the same latitudinal line. But India's claims that the eastern channel is the main one and as a result the island belongs to her. She named the new island New Moore though the northern Moore island is much in the west as defined by latitudinal line.

The formation of the island is a natural process and the formed land is a part of the natural ecosystem. But manmade boundaries made the island's natural position disputed, causing a socio-environmental thorn. Since the island is now under sociopolitical dispute, both India and Bangladesh should have followed the social and international

norms. Neither Bangladesh, nor India should physically own this land before the dispute is resolved through joint venture survey or by international legal procedure.

However, India didn't have the patience of waiting for such 'socio-environmental' solution. She hoisted the Indian flag there and established a base of Border Security Force (BSF) on the island regularly visited by her naval gunships perhaps guarding against imaginary invasion. This act is apparently an instance of 'power-coerced' strategy. In the last meet held during third week of September this year, Bangladesh again urged for arranging a joint survey, but Indian counterpart negated on the ground that they were sure the island was theirs. Bangladesh has enough evidence that the island is hers.

One explanation to one-sided occupation of the disputed island

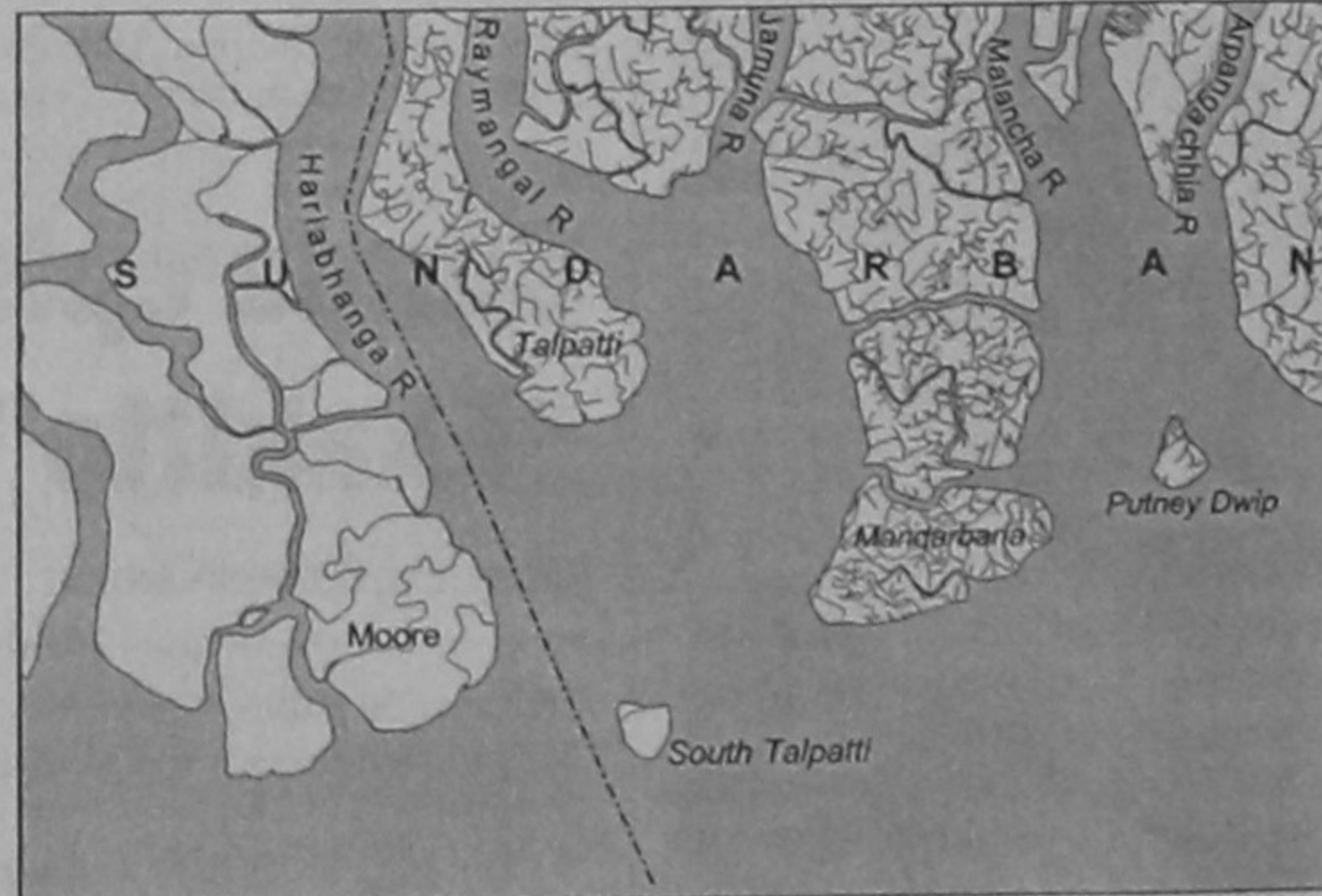


Figure: Location of South Talpatti in southwestern Bangladesh (adapted from Banglapedia)

India provides is that her force and navy stationed in the island are for testing the soil thereof to see its origin. This is such an unfounded

logic that no knowledgeable man can agree to. Such a study on most of Bangladesh's islands can find Indian, and even Nepalese or Chinese soil

because the river-eroded soil even from those countries upstream.

Why does India disagree to conduct a joint survey and keep this dispute alive just as another thorn in Indo-Bangla good neighbourly relations? The island under formation is a big one having still underwater extension towards northwest. This means that possession of the island is rather a lucrative one. But how much lucrative? Does this worth more than unhindered friendly relations with a neighbour?

Now let us see the actual geographical position of the island in the map. Thanks to our Bangladesh editors and the contributor (Masud Hasan Chowdhury) the map has been published even in the Indian press (e.g. one in "Headlines India" published on 18/09/2008). The map shows that bordering river Hariabhangha comes down obliquely towards southeast. It is clearly seen that the river channel on the east of the island is mainly that of

Raymangal and Jamuna rivers having only the eastern branch from Hariabhangha. So the eastern wider channel is contributed mainly by two decidedly Bangladeshi rivers and partly by bordering Hariabhangha having only about 1/5th.

The last meeting between the two sides was of medium level, rather a technical one. The highest state authority of India needs to look into the matter wisely, not cleverly. After all, the case is between two parts of the same greater Bengal. As the bigger neighbour India must come forward to establish a further congenial relation. Otherwise, Bangladesh may raise the issue at the United Nations for a first solution according to UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Then the survey will be international and the outcome would be based on actual data.

Abdus Sattar Molla is a PhD researcher in NE, Singapore. He can be reached at asmolla1@yahoo.com.