

7-Cs: Prerogatives for a new education policy

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SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE present government is designing yet another "new" national education policy. This is indeed timely, especially in a globalising world in which other countries have catapulted themselves into the 21st Century by vigorously engaging in "knowledge revolution" and by developing their human resources that are aligned with the global knowledge architecture.

However, an editorial in the Daily Star (April 12) makes a critical observation; that there have been numerous education policies proposed in the past and that most of them have gathered more dust than the attention of those who "could" and "should" have made a difference. The editorial also appropriately directs the government to look into the earlier documents and translate the recommendations into action.

What was gleaned from the education minister's utterances is that the emphasis will be on vocational training and that initiatives will be taken to stem the dropout rates that currently plague the system. While both issues are important, it would be useful to contextualise them under a broad framework.

Under this framework, seven prerogatives are offered. They are as follows: **Commitment:** A very important determinant of any accomplishment in the education sector is the commitment of its

various stakeholders. Perhaps the earlier documents had excellent content but failed to gain the commitment of those responsible for its operationalisation. Commitment is not automatic; it must be generated through a program that is exciting, achievable, rewarding, demonstrates clear benefits, involves the stakeholders, and is measurable.

Beginning at the very top, commitment must be palpable as it is energised, transmitted, and sustained at all levels. It must be built on a shared platform between internal and external stakeholders, including the international parties, policy planners and implementers, local bodies, school management committees, teachers, parents, students and even the ultimate beneficiaries -- the employers. Importantly, there must be a leader or "driver" at each level who keeps the team energised and focused.

Comparability: A question is whether to build the education system from scratch or emulate. The rapid expansion of education systems in the past 30 years in Asia, particularly East Asia, and the ascendance of this region in social and economic status testify to the role of education in shaping the future of a country. Some of these countries lead the world in cross-national comparisons of student achievement.

By learning from the experiences of these countries, it may be possible to leapfrog into an education system that will pay the richest dividends. Finding

such a country to emulate should also serve as an effective benchmark. Here emulation means replicating what is possible and adapting what is needed. If a system is emulated, it is important to compare achievements with the emulated system.

Clientele: The education sector must be designed with its main clientele (students) in mind, whom it wants to serve and empower. It should develop appropriate and responsive programs, processes, and organisation structures that would best be able to deliver. Educational needs and circumstances may vary for different groups, that may require a balancing act between standardisation and customisation of the entire program. Any attempt at a one-size-fits-all education policy that amounts to force-feeding will surely be counter-productive. The program must be designed for optimal benefits; access, equity, and costs are other major components that must be considered in designing the program.

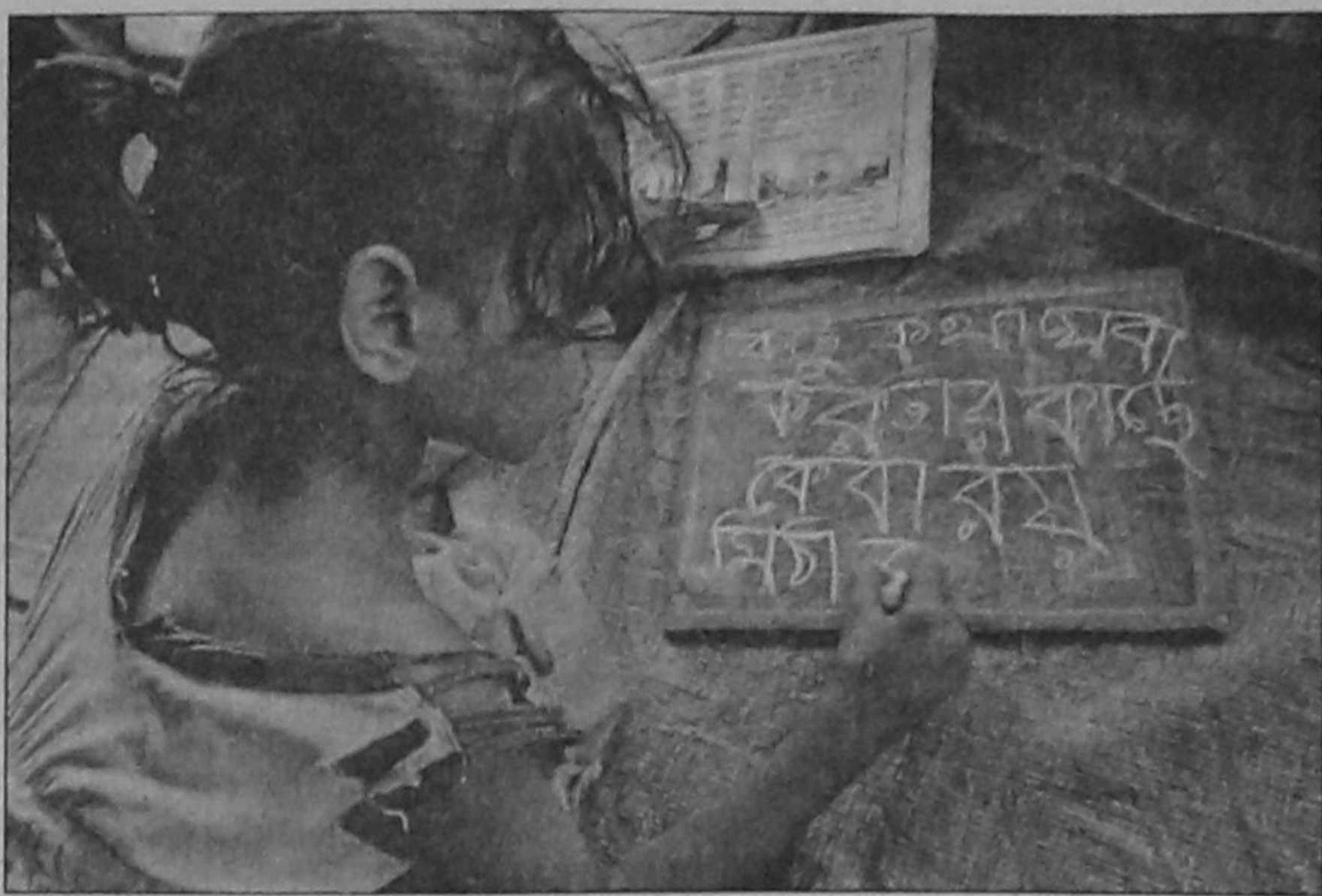
Capacity: One of the biggest stumbling blocks today for the entire education system is its incapacity to conceptualise, create, package, price and deliver educational products and resources to its clientele. Capacity problems are reflected in the poor condition and functionality of the buildings, inadequate ability of the teachers to teach, a decrepit curriculum that cannot even articulate what output it expects to generate, abysmal management systems at all levels, etc. These deficiencies stymie one's imagination as to how the education system has continued to exist under the guidance of various governments and their development partners that have pushed various programs.

Given the remorseless pace of evolution of knowledge products from a global perspective, proactive capacity must be

built among educational planners who are able to sense the rapidly changing needs in the context of a networked global order to make the education system relevant, innovative, and responsive. What is the capacity of the education system to adapt itself quickly to produce human resources in, say, healthcare or information technology that the labour market needs? Clearly, it is vital to build capacity in the following areas -- managerial skills, curriculum design, quality teaching, evaluation systems, and research capabilities -- to sustain a first-rate education system.

Coordination: To eke out efficiencies, the education system must be integrated in a linked structure in which one sub-system feeds into the next in a smooth and integrated operation to achieve clear and measurable goals. For example, moving a cohort of students through the different levels of schooling is a complex supply chain operation whose effective functioning will determine whether the final products (graduating students) will be able to blend seamlessly into the labour market. Session jams and lack of capacity to accommodate students from one level to the next represent failures of coordination, as do the shifting of examinations, failure to provide textbooks, poor supervision, etc. The most important aspect of coordination is that the sub-systems must work like parts of a machine to keep it functioning. With poor coordination, the machine is rendered dysfunctional.

Cash: The education sector is financially challenged; in fact deprived! As things stand, investment in education in Bangladesh is roughly 2.7% of GDP. Comparative numbers are roughly; Pakistan 2.6%, India 3.2%, Thailand 4.2%,



She needs help to go further.

Malaysia 6.2%, UK 5.6% and USA 5.3%. These numbers suggest a link between educational expenditures and the stage of development of a country. Clearly, unless greater financial resources are mobilised and allocated to this sector, the goal of developing needed human resources to fulfill the country's needs will not be achievable. If the government is serious, it must increase the allocation of "cash" to this sector substantially.

Communication: The final piece that ties everything together is communication. How is the system performing? What are the metrics? Who gets to know what so that system coordination is insured? It is imperative that the education system incorporates a system of metrics that arrays the system against defined standards. Such metrics are needed for resource inputs, process indicators, and output goals. Each sub-system (primary education, NFE, secondary education,

vocational and technical education, tertiary education, Textbook Board, NAPE, BANBEIS, UGC, etc.) must have its own metrics that should be aligned with super-ordinate metrics to communicate with each other about system performance. To the extent possible, public metrics are also needed as a sort of report card to communicate to the public about the system's achievements. Good metrics should also lead to a system that rewards good performers and punishes bad ones.

Designing an education policy is an arduous task. The desire of the government to come up with an education policy in the next three months is a tall order. Perhaps a little more time should be budgeted to think through the substantive issues.

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Perennial problem

With the population of Dhaka increasing at an abnormal rate, the number of vehicles increasing at even a faster rate, and the narrow roads getting narrower because of illegal occupation, the city's transport system has virtually collapsed.

HUSAIN IMAM

WHEN a delegation from reporter's unity called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, she told them that her government was going to construct an elevated expressway from Gazipur to Narayanganj via Tongi to ease traffic congestion of Dhaka city. She also said that there were plans to build a sky rail, a ring road and a modern river transport system around Dhaka. Earlier her communication minister told us about subway train service for the city.

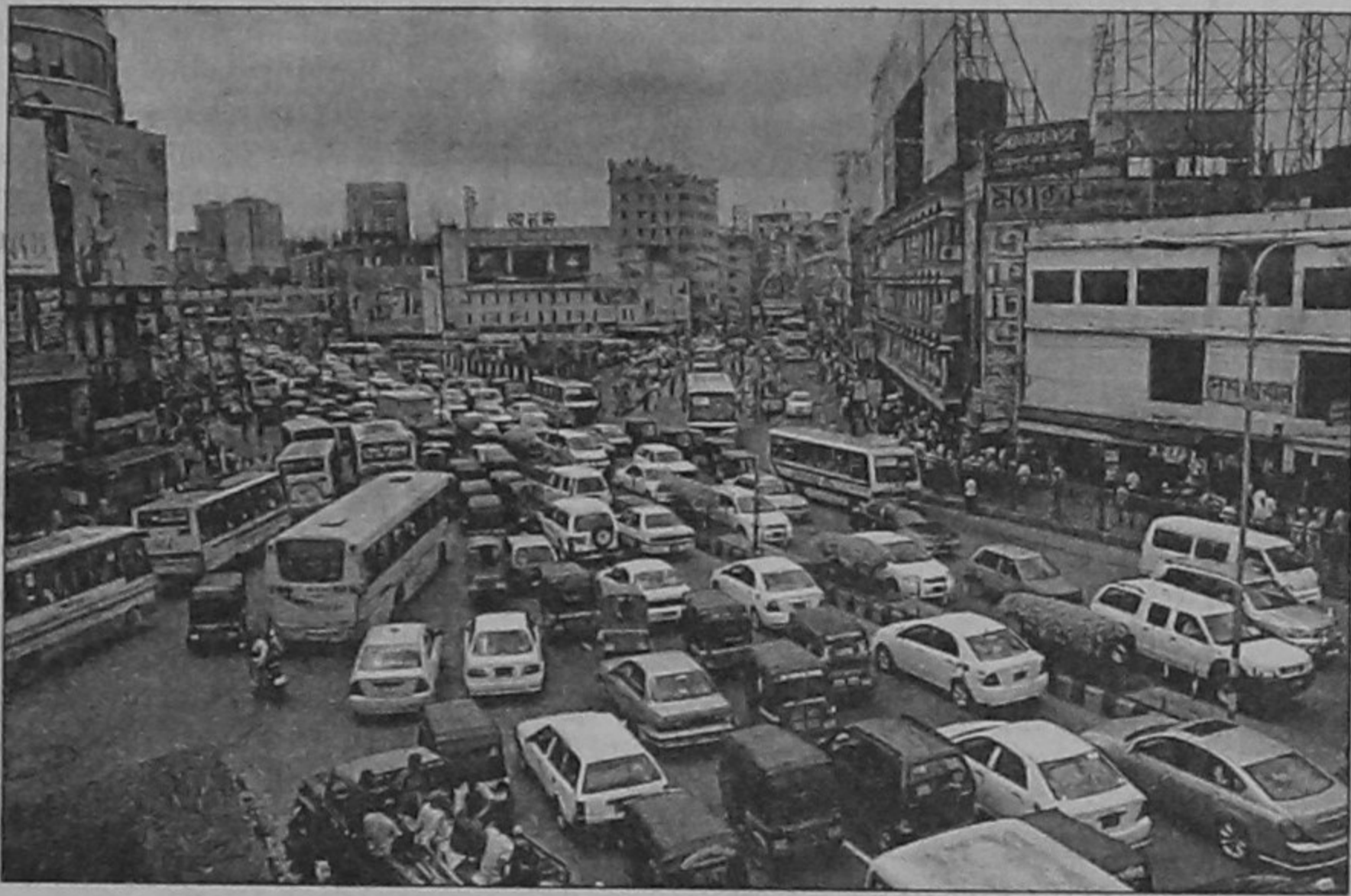
What could be better news for citizens of Dhaka, if we could believe what Sheikh Hasina said? We have reasons to be apprehensive of such promises. In the past, every time a new government came to power, we had heard similar promises, which were never fulfilled.

The communication minister of the past BNP-Jamaat government, Barrister

Nazmul Huda, did not stop at telling us only about elevated expressway, metro rail, mono rail, ring road, etc., he also told us that he was going to give us magnetic train (Maglev) that would take us to Chittagong from Dhaka in an hour or so. All those promises remained like fairy tales. None of them saw daylight.

With the population of Dhaka increasing at an abnormal rate, the number of vehicles increasing at even a faster rate, and the narrow roads getting narrower because of illegal occupation, the city's transport system has virtually collapsed. The people have to spend hours on the streets, sitting and sweating in their vehicles and battling through the unending traffic jam, before they can make their way to destinations.

Constructing an underground train system, elevated expressway, sky rail or ring road will require huge funds and considerable time. In the backdrop of unprecedented worldwide economic



Going nowhere!

recession, arranging funds might be difficult.

There can be no argument that the government has to undertake sooner rather than later one or more of the above mentioned projects, whatever may be the cost and time involved, but at the same time they ought to do something quickly and urgently to ease the pressure so that the multiple problems -- traffic congestion, crisis of water, gas and electricity --

that the inhabitants of the city are now confronted with, do not snowball.

Among some immediate measures to ease the problem of traffic jams, the withdrawal of rickshaws from the main roads may be one that the concerned authorities will have to seriously look into.

It is certainly not an easy job. Although the official number of rickshaws plying in the city is about 80,000, unofficially the figure is believed to be 500,000 or more. If

that be the case, about 20 lac people (considering 4 members per family), are dependent on rickshaws for their living. Even if half of them are withdrawn from the road, about 250,000 rickshaw pullers will lose their employment. The government will have to rehabilitate them somehow. One way could be to provide them loan on easy terms to own a rickshaw and ply in their home districts or upazillas.

This is one side of the issue. The other side is to find alternative transport facilities for the vast majority of city dwellers who depend on rickshaws for transportation. To solve this problem, as an ordinary citizen, my suggestions are as follows:

One, make the zebra crossings safe and easy to negotiate, construct adequate number of safe and comfortable foot over-bridges, repair the existing foot-paths, construct new ones where necessary and keep them free from obstacles so that the pedestrians can easily walk through. I have seen people traveling by rickshaw even for a short distance because of lack of proper footpaths and safe zebra crossings.

Two, withdraw the old and unfit minibuses and replace them with large single and double-decker buses.

Three, increase the number of GNGs and cabs, provide them with necessary parking facilities at different strategic

points of the city, bring them under efficient administration and make sure they run on meters and are easily available on call.

If city dwellers can easily get taxi cabs at their doors with a telephone call, many of them would not want to own a car.

Four, construct adequate number of well shaded bus stands at suitable points and have a notice board with the bus number, route, time schedule, etc clearly exhibited. Also make sure the buses do not load or unload passengers at any other place except at the stoppages. If they do, they must be heavily penalised.

Another reason for traffic jams is undeniably the inadequate number of roads compared to the huge population. And the few roads we have are not free of obstructions. The giant steel waste bins of the city corporation placed on the road sides are also a source of obstruction to traffic flow in some areas. The concerned authorities should be able to do something if they are really serious about it.

The last but not the least is the issue of compliance of traffic rules. As a seafarer, I had the opportunity to visit many cities of the world. I do not remember having seen a country where traffic rules are so flagrantly violated as in Bangladesh.

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Trying to right a wrong

Unfortunately for us, we neither follow democracy nor Islam in its pristine form. All our rulers, elected or un-elected, civilian or military, have virtually worked incessantly to undermine and throttle democracy in this country.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

IN a democracy no one, not even the government, can get away with doing a wrong or not doing enough to right a wrong. Good and democratic governance over the years have taught the

people to denounce and reject the wrong and espouse the right. In a democracy the judiciary, the police, the bureaucracy, the media and the civil society are so strong, independent and public welfare oriented that they would just not allow any wrong to go unaddressed and fester.



It is important to follow the true teachings of Islam.

Recently during the G20 summit in London a pedestrian, not involved in the anti summit protest, was wrongly pushed to the ground by a police man and subsequently the man died in a hospital of heart attack. This caused immense public outrage. A video footage showed a police man hitting the man down from behind. A government enquiry was ordered immediately to probe the incident in an effort to right the wrong. This is democracy at its best.

In Islam, which has been much maligned by western democracies, it is an article of faith for a true Muslim to fight a wrong if need be physically, and if this is not possible then to protest it by words of mouth, and if this also is not possible then to feel agonised and hateful at heart of the wrong done and the wrong doer.

The last mentioned reaction which is to summon hatred and condemnation in one's heart towards the wrong and the wrong doer is considered to be the weakest form of faith for a Muslim. It implies that a Muslim ceases to be a true Muslim if he or she does not feel like despising and revolting at heart against any wrong and the wrong doer around him or her. This is the true teaching of the holy prophet of Islam. Imagine the greatness of Islam and the magnificence of the message, the Messenger of Islam propagated some 15 centuries ago.

Unfortunately for us, we neither follow democracy nor Islam in its pristine form. All our rulers, elected or un-elected, civilian or military, have virtu-

ally worked incessantly to undermine and throttle democracy in this country. And our clerics have gone about telling us what should be the length of the beard, whether it is the right foot or the left one to take first while entering and exiting the mosque, whether one should use Miswak or toothpaste and tooth brush to clean our teeth, whether one should or should not use fork and spoon while eating food, whether one should or should not watch TV and such peripheral matters as essential characteristics of a pious Muslim.

Likewise they would insist on women shunning liberal education in schools and colleges, confining themselves within the four walls of the house, never trying to step forward ahead of their husbands while walking, being content with cooking meals for the house inmates, never saying "No" to the demands of their husbands, producing and taking good care of children etc as traits of a pious Muslim woman.

They would never tell you the essence of Islam which is to surrender oneself completely before the Almighty Allah, follow the Quranic injunctions fully and faithfully, love youngsters and respect elders regardless of faith, race and colour, give alms to the poor and work diligently to establish truth, justice and peace in the family, in the society and in the national life etc failing which one's faith will remain questionable before Allah no matter how many times one says one's prayer and performs Hajj or Umrah.

Scornful of democratic principles of serving the cause of the people and the country, most of our politicians in league with dishonest businessmen have gone about making their personal fortunes and becoming billionaires in no time. These political elites have no scruples. They are prepared to do anything fair or foul just to cling to power so that they can continue to build their personal fortunes while the poor and the marginalised continue to swell both in number and poverty.

Equally enamoured of the pleasures of the mundane life, most of our clerics have gone about Islamising almost everything and anything they can lay hands upon. Where there is money to make, you will find a label of 'Islam'. Undeniably these Islamic brand institutions and their products are doing good business. Look at the Islamic banks, Islamic insurance companies, Islamic TV channels, Islamic NGOs and many other traditional commercial banks with an Islamic flavour in the shape of Shariah Board with Islamic clerics guiding the banking system. Most of our clerics have business to do with these institutions in one capacity or the other besides being involved in thousands of seminaries, orphanages and mosques all lumped together to attract cash donations in the name of religion from people at home and abroad.

No wonder wrongs and injustices have been piled up in all facets of our life. While it is a wrong done to a family if an innocent man is killed and a woman

raped, it is a greater wrong and an injustice when the government as the executive authority of the state, and the judiciary as the custodian of justice fail to punish the killers and rapists and they continue to commit more such crimes. And how abominably wrong it is when concerned authorities not only let a criminal go unpunished but also rope in an innocent man or men and punish them. Unfortunately it is wrong and injustice that we are more familiar with in this country because everything is done in the name of politics and religion.

Small wonder when we hear that while Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently issued a cheque worth Tk 1 lakh each to 21 families of victims who suffered atrocities at the hands of the notorious Bangla Bhai led JMBB cadres in Bagmara upazila of Rajshahi in 2004 and 2005, the cheques were quickly taken away by the muscle-men of the local ALMP Enamul Haque. It is like trying to right a wrong with one hand and doing a wrong with the other. It is an uphill task to even try to right a wrong because the wrong doers are far too many and far too strong.

The caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed made a bold attempt to right the wrong by rounding up the corrupt powerful elites but failed in the face of mounting pressure from their cronies and sympathisers at home and their powerful lobbyists abroad.

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