

Unesco enters 65 years

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QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

THE United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) today, November 16, completes 64 years of its chequered and eventful existence with a change at the top, bringing for the first time a woman, as well as the first East European, Irina Bokova, as the Director General. Established on November 16, 1945, Unesco's constitution was adopted and signed on this day in London. The constitution however, came into force on November 4, 1946, after ratification by twenty countries.

Unesco is the heir of the League of Nations' International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation. At present, it has 193 member states and 6 associate members. It is based in Paris, with over 50 field offices and many specialised institutes and centres throughout the world. Most of the field offices are "cluster" offices covering three or more countries; there are also national and regional offices.

The purpose of the Organisation is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations, and pursues its objectives through five major programs: education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture, and communication and information. Projects sponsored by Unesco include literacy, technical, and teacher-training programs; international science programs; promotion of independent media and freedom of the press; regional and cultural history projects, promotion of cultural diversity; international cooperation agreements to secure the world's cultural and natu-

ral heritage (World Heritage Sites) and to preserve human rights; and attempts to bridge the worldwide digital divide.

Controversy and internal reform:

Unesco has been the center of controversy in the past, particularly in its relationships with the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and the former Soviet Union. During the 1970s and 1980s, Unesco's support for a "New World Information and Communication Order" and its MacBride report calling for democratisation of the media and more egalitarian access to information was condemned in these countries as attempts to curb freedom of the press. Unesco was perceived by some as a platform for communist and Third World countries to attack the West, a stark contrast to accusations made by the USSR in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In 1984, the United States withheld its contributions and withdrew from the organisation in protest, followed by the United Kingdom in 1985 and Singapore in 1986. Following a change of government in 1997, the UK rejoined. The United States rejoined in 2003, followed by Singapore in 2007. Part of the reason for their change of stance was due to considerable reforms implemented by Unesco over the past 10 years. The number of divisions in Unesco was cut in half, allowing a corresponding halving of the number of directors -- from 200 to under 100, out of a total staff of approximately 2,000 worldwide. At the same time, the number of field units was cut from a peak of 1287 in 1998 to 93 today. Parallel management structures, including 35 Cabinet-level special adviser positions,



Uniting the world through education and culture.

were abolished.

Between 1998 and 2009, 245 negotiated staff departures and buy-outs took place, causing the inherited \$12 million staff cost deficit to disappear. The staff pyramid, which was the most top-heavy in the UN system, was cut back as the number of high-level posts was halved and the "inflation" of posts was reversed through the down-grading of many positions. Open competitive recruitment, results-based appraisal of staff, training of all managers and field rotation were instituted. In addition, the Internal Oversight Service (IOS) was established in 2001 to improve organisational performance by including the lessons learned from program evaluations into the overall reform process.

The General Conference of Unesco elected Irina Bokova from Bulgaria on October 15 as director-general of the Organisation, to replace Mr. Koichiro Matsuura. Ms. Bokova is the first woman and the first representative of Eastern Europe in the top position of Unesco. At her investiture on October 23, she expressed pride at this, adding: "My accession to this high office gives confidence to all women, wherever they may be." Ms. Bokova also declared: "East,

west, north, south: I will endeavour to build numerous bridges between these parts, all involved in the process of globalisation. Globalisation calls for watchfulness because -- while it liberates and helps millions get out of poverty and destitution -- it also risks reducing our world of rich diversity into uniformity."

The incoming director-general spoke of the "new humanism" she intends to promote, and said: "Cultural diversity and inter-cultural dialogue contribute to the emergence of a new humanism that reconciles the global and the local, and teaches us anew how to build the world. [...] For me, humanism means aspiring to tolerance, knowledge and cultural diversity. It is rooted in ethics and in social and economic responsibility. It comes into its own by extending assistance to the most vulnerable. It is at the heart of the commitment to struggle to face our greatest common challenges, particularly respect for the environment."

The 193 Member States of Unesco gathered for the 35th session of the General Conference, the highest govern-

ing body of the Organisation, on October 14 and voted on the replacement of part of the Executive Board, Unesco's other governing body. Candidates were divided into five electoral groups. Bangladesh was elected in Group IV, which is responsible for day to day activities and budget making of Unesco, along with Vietnam, Japan, India and Kazakhstan.

Unsatisfactory activities of Bangladesh National Commission for Unesco:

Bangladesh became a member of Unesco on October 27, 1972 in pursuance of Article VII of the Unesco Constitution. The Bangladesh National Commission for Unesco is headed by the education minister. However, its activities are not yet up to the mark. There is enough scope left for further expansion of its functions in rendering assistance in drawing training programs for the teachers in their related fields, particularly before bringing any change in the syllabus, developing the curricula, and facilitating various programs in conformity with the provisions of the Unesco constitution for the improvement of education, culture, science and technology. After all, the assistance of Unesco and the lessons and experience of its national commissions in different countries can contribute significantly to the development and appropriate management of human resources in Bangladesh, especially in the light of the unprecedented progress in the field of science and technology including Information Technology.

But, unfortunately, during the rule of the BNP-Jamaat government, the Unesco Bangladesh Commission was thoroughly politicised, and the previous caretaker government, despite some achievements in different areas, also did not take any remedial measures as regards the Commission. However, Unesco is held in high esteem by teachers and all concerned with education throughout the world, including Bangladesh, particularly because of the

recommendations of Unesco along with ILO concerning the status of teachers. They are:

- Since education is a service of fundamental importance it should be recognised as a responsibility of the state;
- Since education is an essential factor in economic growth, educational planning should form an integral part of total economic and social planning undertaken to improve living conditions
- Teachers' salaries should : 1) reflect the importance to society of the teaching function and hence the importance of teachers as well as the responsibilities of all kinds which fall upon them from the time of their entry into the service; 2) compare favourably with salaries paid in other occupations requiring similar or equivalent qualifications; 3) provide teachers with the means to ensure a reasonable standard of living for themselves and their families as well as to invest in further education or in the pursuit of cultural activities, thus enhancing their professional qualification.

At the concluding session of the recent 35th General Conference of Unesco, Davidson Hepburn, who chaired it, stressed that the time for action had come. He said: "We must believe that in all our endeavours we need partners. Unesco alone cannot achieve what it has to do." The statement of Mr. Davidson Hepburn seems to have particular relevance to the Bangladesh context, where active participatory role and combined efforts of all concerned with education including people's representatives, teachers, students and their guardians, development partners and government officials, has remained a cry for a long time.

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Reforming higher education for growth

Academic curricula, particularly in universities, must address the modern trends and future needs. Bangladeshi public universities seem to be unprepared for this commitment. Many of their subjects and curricula are obsolete and redundant, whereas many are missing from the viewpoint of science, technology, and business in the modern world.

BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

IN a developing nation like Bangladesh, economic growth is instrumental in fighting poverty and ensuring development. Bangladesh has been registering annual economic growth of more than 5 percent on average for the last two decades. This figure for a developing nation is commendable, if not impressive. But the ongoing global and domestic issues on food, energy, infrastructure, and law and order, have exposed a number of challenges that have cast shadows on Bangladesh's growth prospects. The country needs identify a priority sector that will be most effective for reform and growth.

I argue that higher education must be the priority sector. But it has remained unattended for various reasons, and now requires immediate repair to let the economy move forward. Reforms in other areas such as the judiciary and bureaucracy are expected to be easier once significant progress in this core sector has been achieved. As seen from the developmental experience of most emerging nations, higher education in particular can raise productivity by upgrading human capital.

The gross primary school enrolment rate in Bangladesh is around 90 percent, and secondary school enrolment has more than doubled since independence in 1971. However, similar progress has not been made at the higher levels. Since higher education institutions, that include almost 80 universities (21 public), can take only 10 percent of higher secondary graduates, there remains a serious bottleneck in the supply side of higher education.

Given the exponential growth of private universities, enrolment problem is likely to dissipate while quality will remain a core concern as before. Various studies by S.M. Aminuzzaman, M. Ehsan, M. Masum, and Y. Kitamura assert that the quality of higher education in Bangladesh has declined steadily over the last two decades. If Bangladeshi universities were to compete with western universities in this age of globalisation, they would see a massive lag in Bangladesh's educational standards. The quality of education in Bangladesh is much lower than that of India and even Pakistan.

Economists Bosworth and Collins (2003) measured the education-quality variable for 84 countries across the

globe. In a scale between 72 to minus 12, while India and Sri Lanka score 20.8, Bangladesh earns only 2.8. Even Pakistan, a country often noted for excessive non-science, fanatical education, scores 11.3 in the same study.

The UNDP has developed education indices for 2008 based on adult literacy and gross enrolment. Bangladesh scored slightly higher than Pakistan (0.503 > 0.466) in the education index due to high primary enrolment. But lower education quality in Bangladesh in comparison to Pakistan could be a reason why Bangladesh is ranking lower (140) than Pakistan (136) in the Human Development Index 2008. India, with a higher education index (0.62) ranks 128 in the same list. More than 14 percent of total government expenditure is spent on education in Bangladesh. The corresponding figure is 11 percent in both India and Pakistan. While the government spending on education in Bangladesh is no less than that of India and Pakistan in percentage terms, the quality of education is.

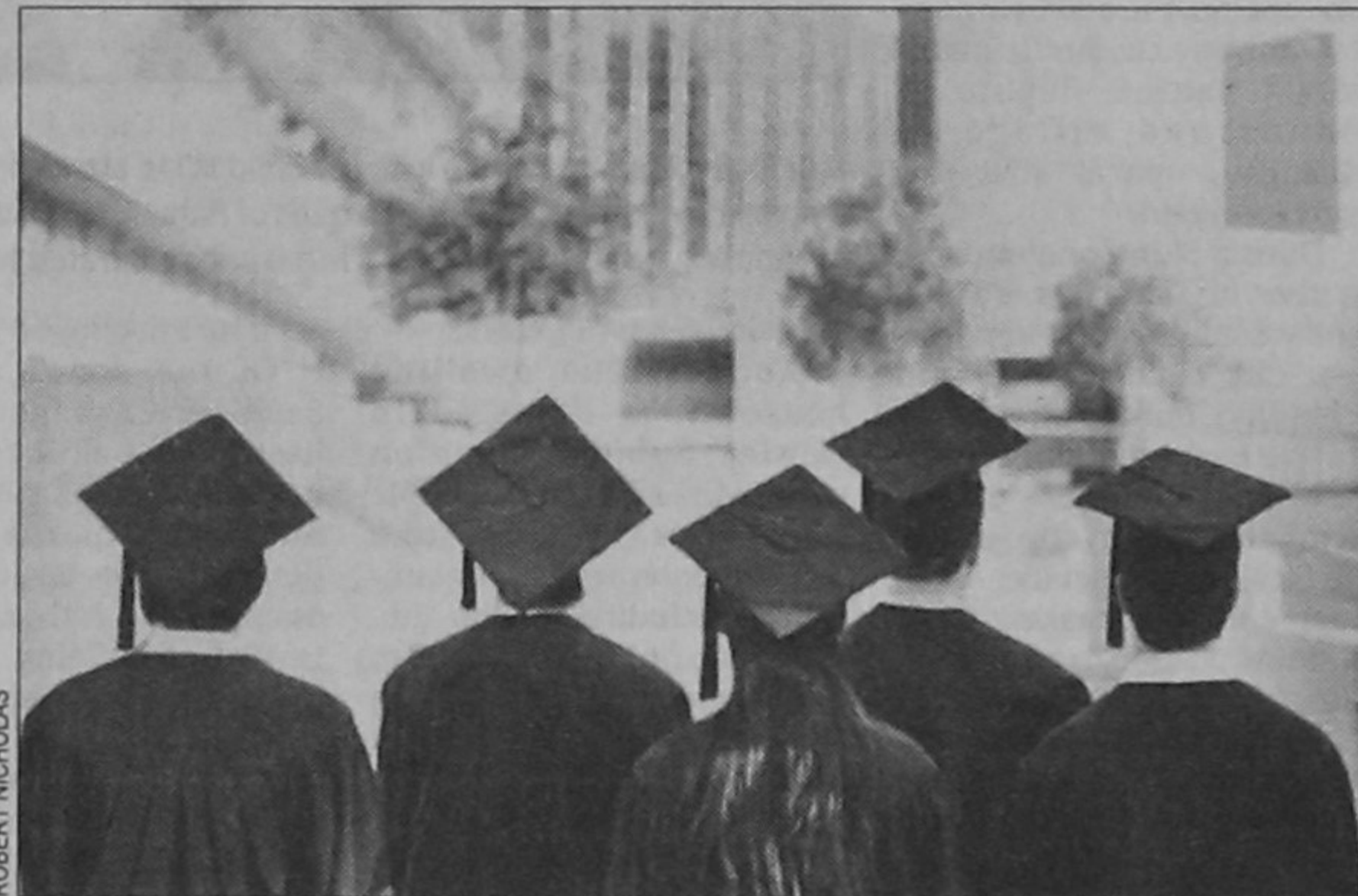
The causes of this deterioration in educational quality are often rooted in student and teacher politics, faulty recruitment practices, the deficiency of research and scholarship, the lack of accountability of teachers, the absence of transparency in grading, and finally, poor governance. Excessive political zeal of a section of teachers is often manifested in grouping, lobbying, statements to the media, and even meetings and processions on campus. When teachers are involved in gaining undue privileges through politics, students cannot be blamed for doing the same thing. These activities are detrimental to maintaining

a peaceful learning atmosphere of study, research, and scholarship.

The recruitment of teachers should be open, fair, and competitive to keep the universities abreast of the global standard. Indian and Pakistani universities, for instance, attend American job markets to select the best possible candidates. This is the first step needed to improve quality. Unfortunately, this practice has never been seen in Bangladeshi public universities. Rather, their recruitment process is designed to protect homemade products, and is often plagued by nepotism, gender-bias, political preferences, and racial discrimination. Those who have finished their master's program are generally hired as new teaching staff.

As A. Choudhury writes: "Universities in France, Egypt, Singapore, and China have recently made top-level hiring from abroad. Ominously, in Bangladesh's public universities, well connected political activists from among professors are still gracing important chairs (No more Oxford of the East, DS 10/7/08). As A.A. Khan rightly asserts, corruption in education is the root of all kinds of corruption, and it fuels corruption in other sectors (DS 4/26/08). Often, an obscure system, based on political connections rather than on merit, is used for recruitment and promotion. Hence, the quality of higher education remains sub-optimal, and even drops day by day, causing further misuse of national resources, the diversion of talent, and brain drain.

No system has ever developed without accountability. Under the current arrangement, public university teachers are not accountable to students for their



Are our graduates ready to face the world?

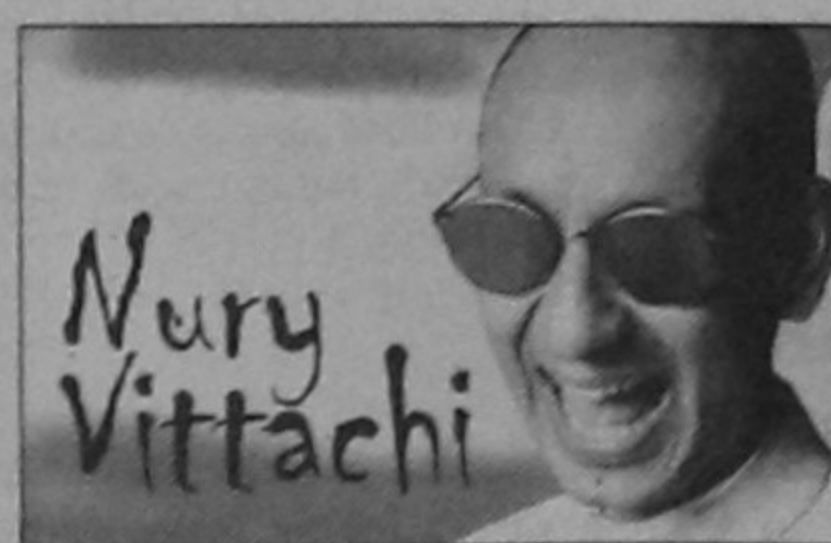
performance and grading. The practice of students' evaluation of teachers, which is the key to the western pedagogical uplift, has never been applied to Bangladesh's public university professors either for their promotion or reappointment. As a result, negligence to curricula essentially leads to deterioration in pedagogy. Universities and departments along with teachers should be brought under a ranking system to promote competition and quality.

Education is the field from which all reforms should begin. It is the source of upgrading human capital needed for continuing growth in a society. Academic curricula, particularly in universities, must address the modern trends and future needs. Bangladeshi public universities seem to be unprepared for this commitment. Many of

their subjects and curricula are obsolete and redundant, whereas many are missing from the viewpoint of science, technology, and business in the modern world. There hardly exists any linkage between public universities and the job market. Finally, the higher education institutions show a less than satisfactory track record in research. Reform must address these issues. Otherwise, the universities will not only fail to provide human capital for long run growth, but also aggravate the already bad problems of lower productivity and unemployment.

This writing draws from the essay: Challenges of the New Decade and Reforms for Growth in Bangladesh, presented at the Bangladesh Conference on Oct 9, 2009 at Harvard University. Dr. Biru Paksha Paul is Assistant Professor of Economics at the State University of New York at Cortland, USA.

Books which change lives



YOUR humble narrator visited two book clubs recently. One was mostly women, while the other was a mixed group of youngsters. Both groups were so intelligent. I was particularly dazzled by the kids' analysis of post-Freudian scatological in

Winnie-the-Pooh.

On my way home, I popped into a (all male) bar, where the intellectual level of conversation remained grimly low, never rising above prehensile grunting punctuated by belches.

Guys, guys!

We have to be careful. Adult males have been in charge for the past three million years, but our reign will end really soon if we don't smarten up.

At the office the following morning, I found an invitation to give a talk on "Books That Change Your Life." Where to start? I made a list and asked others to do the same. As nominations came in, I was intrigued to find more novels

listed than personal development books: To Kill a Mockingbird, Bleak House, The Lord of the Rings and so on.

That last choice reminded me of the kid I sat next to at school, who read this 1,200-page book twice, giving it half a year of his life. Afterwards, he was convinced he was turning into a Hobbit. "My feet-tops have gone all hairy," he said.

I laughed. But a few years later, I saw an article in a scientific magazine which said people who believe their bodies will grow in a certain way sometimes make it happen. Maybe he was turning into a Hobbit.

Then I remembered that his dad was so hairy and uncommunicative he was widely assumed to be either a Neanderthal man or a Kodiak bear, which would explain his son's hairy feet.

Still, the idea of reading books to alter your body was fascinating. If I read Skellig, a novel about an angel, would I grow wings? If I read Dolly Parton's biography would I end up with an enormous pair of big, round, um, eyes? If I read Moby-Dick might my chances of getting a six-pack recede further?

An academic told me that the reason books change lives is due to something

called Neuro-Linguistic Programming. A long, powerful novel is an emotional roller-coaster that grips your mind for a few weeks. "When you put it down, your brain has been rewired. You are not the same person you used to be," she said. I asked if this was anything like "identity theft." She described my suggestion as esoteric (or the word may have been "idiotic").

But the most interesting thing she said was this. More women read books than men. More children read books than adults. More middle-class people read books than super-rich ones. In other words, people who are young, poor-ish and female now are likely to

be the intelligentsia of the next generation. The meek shall inherit the earth.

This is probably not a bad thing. That lunchtime I asked the guys at the bar to name books that had changed their lives. A guy called Alan said, "I read Lord of the Rings when I was 17."

I asked him whether he turned into a Hobbit. He shook his head. "No, but I was convinced for several years afterwards that I was the reincarnation of Sauron, the Dark Lord." Alan is an auditor. That explains everything.

For more revelations about life changing novels, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com