

Building a cleaner image of the administration

Ministers, MPs, others at the top need to take the lead

THE Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) chairman's frank admission that the anti-graft body has its limitations in fighting corruption and his urge that ministers should also maintain honesty to make the ACC's efforts a success is a welcome message to the nation on the eve of the New Year.

One may also recall the Prime Minister's assertion on more than one occasion that corruption is the number one enemy of the nation. But so far the success in fighting the curse is nothing enviable to write home about. Even the Berlin-based Transparency International's latest ranking in November last year has shown that Bangladesh, with slight improvement in its rank from 2008's level, is struggling hard to scale the rungs upwards from its present position at 13th from the bottom among 180 nations.

While the prime minister and her top administration deserve plaudits for being quite clean and above board, one cannot make an identical claim for the lower echelon of the administration. If, as the anti-graft chief has stressed, the different ministers could remain equally clean in their day-to-day dealings, the message would have gone down the line to inspire the lower level officers and staffs to emulate them.

The cleanliness drive among the people at the top hierarchy of the administration may start by way of making public disclosures of their assets and liabilities every year. In a similar vein, the ministers, Members of Parliament (MPs), and others in high places may also make their annual income tax returns public. That would go a long way in creating an image of confidence in society.

As the ACC chief has informed, corruption eats up between 1.5 and 2 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually, it is not hard to imagine what a huge contribution to the economy it would be should the government succeed in initiating the drive for reducing the level of corruption in its respective ministries.

The nation at the moment is facing a number of challenges to its development and growth from poverty, population explosion and devastating implications of climate change all at a time. The success in facing up to these challenges depends on the top political leadership's courage and integrity of character to lead the nation to the desired end.

It is hoped that the political leadership of the country would be up to the challenge and for the purpose take a fresh pledge to stand on a cleaner image in the New Year.

Imparting pre-primary education

Good idea that needs planned adoption

QUITE clearly the education ministry is according a high priority to the primary education sector as the building block for a wider literacy base and pursuit of higher education with a good grounding. This trend is illustrated by reaching school text books expeditiously and free of cost to the pupils, organising a terminal public examination for primary school-goers in a bid to standardise quality across the board.

There is a further development deserving to be placed in a dynamic context. In a latest spurt of activity and as part of the ongoing process, it seems, the education ministry has decided to introduce a year-long pre-primary course attached to existing primary school infrastructure. This is a good idea insofar as reducing the dropout rate in early schooling goes.

From the outlines given of the plan it appears to us that at this stage one classroom in each primary school would be earmarked for preprimary schooling activity. There is clearly a benefit to be derived from holding the preschool children into the fold of primary education thereby encouraging them to stay on. Nothing like instilling the habit of learning early in the day. Yet, the fact remains that primary schools will be taking on an added responsibility. Are they ready to shoulder it? As it is, primary schooling system is plagued by shortcomings, both in its infrastructure including equipment as well as in its skill base. Therefore, it is a necessary prerequisite for adoption of preschool schooling that deficiencies in the primary education sector are reasonably met before implementing the idea; otherwise both primary and preprimary schooling could suffer.

State minister for primary and mass education Motahar Hossain has very rightly pointed out that primary education is now in a miserable state. 'Neither the teachers nor the students' attend schools timely and education department officials are deficient in monitoring activities. To this we add, dearth of trained teachers being acutely felt requiring setting up of new teachers' training centres.

We can see that the government is trying to increase the size of enrolments through offers of snacks and stipends. While such programmes should be expanded, especially in the backward areas, we may think of providing some incentives to teachers including improvement in their service conditions.

Meanwhile the overarching issue for now is one of management of schools in which professionalism must get a free play.

Introspection and expectations

With some commitment, our agencies can introduce better governance through transparency and accountability, reduce corruption and provide better services in the utility sectors. We have a whole year to measure up to expectations. The first step for achieving change for the better is mental, and everything follows from that.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

HOW fast time flies! We are now entering another year. We have memories of the past year and our aspirations for the next. The beginning of 2010 also marks the passage of an eventful decade and the completion of the first anniversary of our current government.

Last year scientists discovered water on the moon. This pleasant surprise was however more than offset by the continued war in Iraq and Afghanistan and violence and terrorism in Pakistan. We also felt the depressing fingers of recession and its long shadow world-wide.

In Bangladesh, a new democratically elected government has had to face up to the horror of a rebellion from men in uniform and also meet the challenges associated with the restoration of rule of law and the principles of accountability. It has been both a positive as well as a difficult experience.

The past year, the developed and the developing world, watched the gradual emergence of the G-20 as an important political platform associated with global economic governance. This shift away from G-8 was largely due to the direction of leadership given by newly elected US President Obama. This was a departure from the unilateral hegemonies of the US that had characterised the past Bush administration. This was recognition of a changing world and the alignment of institutions with reality -- so necessary to fight the impact of recession and turmoil unleashed by terrorists.

The second was the materialisation of inclusivity through mobile telephony and global connectivity. It is in fact absolutely staggering how deeply and extensively the mobile phone has spread and generated an inter-connectivity that impacts on

every aspect of daily life and livelihoods of billions of people. Mobile telephony has also of course contributed to enhanced opportunities for increasing productivity and generating higher incomes. It may be noted here that by the end of 2009 the number of mobile phones in use in Bangladesh had crossed 50 million -- a figure higher than most countries in Europe.

Other developments in the international field will have to include not only the efforts undertaken but also the consensus not achieved with regard to global trade and climate negotiations. One needs to view the failure of these processes with anxiety and concern because it is already impacting severely on a meaningful engagement in poverty reduction, on the fight against malnutrition and in the provision and access to clean water and proper sanitation.

As a consequence, along with poverty, inequality has risen dramatically and dangerously. The Gini coefficient (which measures income inequality) has quite significantly increased in all countries, both developed and developing. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, were meant to solve these issues by 2015. On the basis of current developments, there is little hope that they will be reached.

Last year saw the Doha Round "celebrate" its tenth anniversary without any conclusion. This has affected the global market playing field and reduced the opportunities of developing countries to generate growth, inclusion and employment through trade. Instead, risks have risen of protectionism. One can only hope that there will be major focus on resolving outstanding issues in 2010 and that the group of Least Developed Countries will not have to suffer due to the lack of understanding among the developed countries.

I now turn to Bangladesh.

It has been a difficult journey since the parliamentary elections held at the end of 2008. Those who were routed in the polls have not been able to accept the reality of the situation. This has affected their willingness to meaningfully participate in the process of governance. Silly excuses have been proffered for their non-presence within the Jatiya Sangsad. This has included the number of available seats for them in the front row. They have probably overlooked the most important axiom. A member of parliament represents his constituency and his actions are denying the constituents the right of being heard.

The Speaker of our parliament has made several efforts to resolve the crisis. However, till now, that has been unsuccessful. One hopes that the new year will see a change. If necessary, the government might like to consider taking the following steps -- making arrangement for appointment of a Deputy Speaker from the Opposition and assuring them through the Speaker that their motions and questions will receive greater attention and be deemed suitable for hearing. Some of the Opposition MPs are taking part in the activities of the Parliamentary Committees. This might encourage them to give up their disruptive approach and come into the House for a more constructive engagement.

The past year has seen absence of bipartisanship within the Parliament on major issues pertaining to foreign policy but it has witnessed the first steps in the restoration of the rule of law.

Accountability has been ensured through the re-affirmation of the principles of justice in the judgment of the Bangabandhu murder case. We have also watched how the government has been careful and mature in its dealings pertaining to the convening of the trial procedure of those charged with criminal activities in the BDR rebellion. There has been some debate with regard to the deaths of some of the accused in custody. One hopes that the coming year will see the judicial process completed without the rights of the accused being compromised in any manner. This is important because the world is carefully monitoring our actions and that will determine their future reaction pertaining to our sensitive 1971 war crimes trial.

We must be above reproach. It is also this concern that has persuaded me to draw the attention of our authorities several times in my column on the need to carefully avoid inflicting any form of torture on anyone incarcerated for any reason and strictly ensure that there are no examples of extra-judicial killing.

There are some other important issues which, I am sure, will receive urgent necessary attention from the relevant authorities.

We are aware that the government is trying its best to resolve the drastic situation that has emerged due to our power crisis. New power generation initiatives are being undertaken. However, efforts are being held back due to interference from different quarters and indecision of the implementation agencies. Transparent time-frames might be the answer. We have to remember that our economic development as well as future direct foreign investment hinges greatly on success in this sector.

The same is true with regard to the initiating of certain projects related to the solution of the terrible traffic problem in Dhaka and in the providing of better and safer transport communication networking within the country. The preliminary steps need to be completed and the related projects underway before the end of 2010. We also need to get our act together with regard to the introduction of machine readable passports consistent with the deadline set by UN International Civil Aviation Organization.

Failure in these critical areas might mean sharp loss of credibility for the government.

My readers are probably already amused with my wish list. Nevertheless, I am an optimist and believe that the glass is always half-full. It is also this that encourages me to believe that with some commitment, our agencies can introduce better governance through transparency and accountability, reduce corruption and provide better services in the utility sectors. We have a whole year to measure up to expectations.

The first step for achieving change for the better is mental, and everything follows from that.

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Understanding special educational needs

There are many students in our schools whose academic careers are terminated by our lack of understanding and compassion. Instead of labelling them "bad students," we need to identify their learning difficulties and if they qualify for special educational needs. By attending to their special needs, we can make education meaningful for them and decrease high dropout rates at primary and secondary levels.

SHIRIN AKTAR AND S. M. ANWARUDDIN

DO all students have similar cognitive styles and abilities to perceive and organise information? Social and educational research says "no." Learning styles and preferences vary greatly among students. It is then obvious that some students face difficulty achieving success at school. Among them are those whom we categorise as students with special educational needs. They have learning difficulties or disabilities which make it harder for them to learn or access education than most other students of the same age. A student with special needs may need extra or different help at school and home because of physical difficulties, problems with thinking and understanding, emotional and behavioural issues, or a combination of these. Due to a lack of awareness and sincerity, we fail to attend to their needs. However, we should properly accommodate students with special needs in regular classrooms and give them an equal learning opportunity both at school and home.

A failure to accommodate students with special needs is a cause of high dropout rates at primary and secondary levels. It also makes education less meaningful for them because education is fundamentally a social and interpersonal process. In this social process, teachers, parents, other adults, and peers play crucial roles in a child's learning and development. Thus, the child is not alone in her/his world discovering various cognitive operations. When we single out the students with special needs by treating them differently, they become socially isolated. This isolation hinders an individual's development of ideas related to their self-concept. These isolated children also develop a negative outlook on life while constructing thoughts about who they are and considering other aspects of human identity as a social being.

What we need for Bangladesh is a tripartite but combined effort. First, the government needs to provide the schools

with teacher training opportunities and specialised materials for instruction and testing. Second, teachers have to make sure that students with special needs are educated, to the maximum extent possible, with other students in the least restrictive environment. Finally, parents should be aware of their children's special needs. They need to realise that having a special educational need or learning a lesson in a different way does not make their children "bad students."

Parents know their children best. They know their likes and dislikes, their strengths and weaknesses, their abilities and challenges. Therefore, staying involved in their children's lives is very critical. Since all parents are not aware of their children's special needs, community and school-based information sharing sessions and parent-teacher meetings can be effective events for creating awareness among parents. In addition to taking care of their children's special needs at home, they can provide essential information to teachers and help develop an effective educational plan for their children.

Like parents, teachers also have very important roles to play. We summarise their roles in three steps: identification, instruction, and assessment. An initial observation of students by the classroom teacher is the first step of identification. If some students are identified, then the teacher needs to modify her instruction for those students and see if the modification makes any difference. If necessary, the teacher can also use diagnostic assessments to identify specific difficulties. Each of the disabling conditions has to be confirmed by applying specific criteria, and teachers need special training and materials for this purpose.

Some of the common learning deficits with which students are most likely to be placed in regular classes are mild mental retardation, sensory impairment, physical impairment, learning disability, emotional disturbance, attention deficits, and hyperactivity.

Scores on a standardised IQ test and students' adaptive behaviours can measure mild mental retardation. By adaptive

behaviours, we mean the behaviours needed for normal functioning in daily living situations, such as expressive and receptive communication, personal hygiene, coping skills and so forth. Students with sensory impairment have vision, hearing, or speech deficits. Physical impairment refers to orthopaedic impairment, such as cerebral palsy or a physical illness, e.g., epilepsy or muscular dystrophy.

Students with a learning disability have average or above average intelligence. However, they function below age or grade level because of physiological, psychological, or cognitive processes involved in understanding and using language or mathematical reasoning. When such characteristics, as poor interpersonal relationships, melancholy, fears associated with school, or other inappropriate behaviours, interfere with learning, we call it emotional disturbance. Students with attention deficit disorder (ADD) are unable to sustain attention and stay focused. They are easily distracted. A student with hyperactivity fidgets excessively, has difficulty sitting, appears restless, and is always on the go.

Once the students with special needs are identified, teachers should instruct them accordingly. They may need to prepare individualised instructional materials. For this purpose, a teacher has to accurately identify her students' weaknesses and strengths. Then, she should set up short and long-term learning objectives and criteria for evaluations. The learning objectives have to be aligned with the individualised goals and students' preferred learning needs and styles. In addition, the teacher needs to make sure that these students participate in regular classroom activities to the fullest extent possible. It is also expected that the teacher will spend time with the students and simplify lessons both before and after the regular classes.

If we do not pay attention to the problems encountered by students with special needs, our assessments and evaluations cannot be reliable and valid. For example, a student who has auditory difficulty may not understand oral directions and can be easily distracted by noise. If a student has visual difficulty, she may not understand written directions and decode symbols and letters. Students with problems of time constraint and anxiety may not be able to complete assessments and provide correct answers. The behaviours of students with special needs may vary greatly. Therefore, factors such as embarrassment and variability of student behaviour may cause incomplete assessments and an inability to demonstrate the

best work.

Since the aforementioned difficulties interfere with the validity and reliability of assessments, teachers should properly accommodate students with special needs. We categorise the accommodations into three broad types of adaptations: test construction, test administration, and testing site. The general format of the test should be simple and information should be presented in small segment to be processed at one time. All directions in a test should be simple and short. The invigilating teacher should read the written directions aloud and slowly and give students enough time to understand the directions and ask questions. If necessary, teachers may provide separate direction in larger fonts to students with visual impairment. During the test, the teachers ought to routinely check students' understanding of directions.

Adaptations during test administration involve change in procedures which may decrease any negative effects of students' disability on their performance. Most of the procedural changes in this type of adaptation are dependent on the types of learning difficulties of students. For example, if a student has a feeling of excessive anxiety, the teacher should avoid adding pressure by admonishing her/him to "Hurry and get finished" or by saying "This test will determine your future." In addition to adaptations in test administration, it can be sometimes necessary to make adaptations in testing site. An example can be allowing students with special needs to take the test in a different location. This can be a school resource room which is quiet and comfortable with fewer distractions.

We believe that there are many students in our schools whose academic careers are terminated by our lack of understanding and compassion. Teachers' and parents' rude comments and insults on their inability to accomplish traditional classroom success can easily turn them off. Instead of labelling them "bad students," we need to identify their learning difficulties and if they qualify for special educational needs. By attending to their special needs, we can make education meaningful for them and decrease high dropout rates at primary and secondary levels. Therefore, it is important that our government, teachers, school administrators, and parents think seriously about the students with special educational needs. We have to act right now because it's better late than never.

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