

## A question of cost, quality or access?

Past experience shows that increasing the number of students in institutions without commensurate increase in amenities is not very good if we look at the quality. Such exercises may even take a "political" hue. That eventuality may pose an existential threat to the cadet colleges.

M. SHAMEEM AHSAN

I am quite enthused by three articles recently published in The Daily Star about Cadet Colleges and their utility against the overall context of the education system in the country. These pieces address a fundamental issue that continues to rattle our conscience in other spheres of life as well -- health, for example. "Equal opportunity" or "equitable access" is a coveted ideal hardly in existence in today's society.

Mr. Ekram Kabir has zestfully countered the points made in Mr. Mushfiqur Rahman's piece about cadet college products not justifying the huge expenditures they incur. I guess the fact needs no reiteration that neither came up with any statistics to bolster their viewpoints simply because there are no statistics available as no study has been conducted on such matters. Therefore, in essence, both tried to argue on some elements of their respective perception.

When we raise such comparative perspectives in a phase of education (secondary in this case), do we not forget a similar lack of "justice" existing in other phases as well? Why don't we complain, then, about the amount of money spent behind an "Applied Physics" graduate who would nonetheless spend his lifetime as a banker? Definitely, the government exchequer has spent more resources for him than

an Arts graduate. There are other examples such as architects or engineers joining the civil service.

In trying to understand what may have been the reason behind Mr. Rahman's perception, I came up with something that I would like to share with the readers and my cadet friends. It seems Mr. Rahman accepts the fact that cadet colleges are great "levellers," as he said in his piece "... Faujdarthat had its egalitarian touch. A fair, competitive entry system ensured that boys from every nook and cranny of the country were selected for this extraordinary journey. The resilience of youth broke down all barriers and distinctions as we drank from the same cup of innocence."

Looking at this perspective of growing up in a system which treats everyone in the same way, a question arises -- whether cadets are well-inserted in the society that we want to build, whether they suffer from any detachment from the mainstream while leading the life of a successful officer in the Armed Forces, in the Civil Service or a businessman.

In other words, what is the lingering benefit of cadet college education? Discipline, hard work, determination and resilience are some of the character traits expected of and often found in a successful cadet. The reality of life requires one to have those qualities for success.

In addition, our nation needs more

"sons of the soil," who would be aware of the twists and turns of the life of average citizens. Empathy for their suffering, understanding of their shortcomings and intention to reach out with a helping hand need to be seen in leaders of tomorrow.

Professional requirements apart, some careers do have an impact that makes the incumbent detached from the society. With a distinct way of life, they have their own association, their own club, slowly building a social identity which is, I dare say, not conducive to appreciating the realities of Bangladesh. When Mr. Rahman says, "I went through five changes of uniforms every day, one to suit each activity. Food was served in a gleaming white dining room adorned with sporting trophies and Navy crests. There was an air of colonial ambience as we unfolded our starched, fresh white napkins while waiters wearing crisp white uniforms served our meals..." does he sound nostalgic yet content? Or, is he just trying to insinuate that "the air of colonial ambience" would inject a different mindset in the cadets that ultimately bring about the "detachment" from the society? I cannot be sure.

But if the latter is his perspective, he might have some among the ex-cadets who would feel the same way. Let me just make one point here -- it would be unfair to accuse only the cadets of elitism for there are many in our society with similar afflictions though they are not ex-cadets.

When Mr. Rahman says, "I hope they will find time to reflect on the unfulfilled promises and how best to redeem ourselves and our beloved school" and Mr. Kabir affirms, "One should also feel the need to assess whether these colleges need to be upgraded to match the current and future needs." I sense, both



Education should teach us equality, not discourage it.

have in mind a mundane "amenities vs. needs" perspective, not the more sublime "ethos or aesthetics" perspective which impinges on the mental make-up of a leader of tomorrow.

I wish now to refer to the other piece by Mr. Md. Touhid Hossain, the immediate past Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh and the current Principal of the Foreign Service Academy. In his article, Mr. Hossain puts succinct arguments with relevant figures to support Mr. Rahman's point that the opportunity cost of the cadet colleges is not justifiable as matters stand.

More importantly, he has made recommendations as to how much more could be done to "extend the opportunity." Again, if we are clear in our minds about the purpose, if we know that access to cadet colleges are only determined by a standardised test, then we must accept that the opportunity could not be extended to all and sundry, however much we juggle with class size or house accommodation.

Past experience shows that the effect of increasing the number of students in institutions without commensurate increase in space and amenities is not

very good if we look at the quality. Such exercises may even take a "political" hue since there are cadet colleges now in every region (notionally speaking) of the country. That eventuality may pose an existential threat to the cadet colleges.

On the other hand, compromising the existing quality of cadet college education would destroy its "raison d'etre" and hand to its detractors a potent argument to do away with the system. Those who are not convinced of the cost benefit of cadet colleges would continue to harbour the same view in spite of the slight "extension of opportunity" achievable according to Mr. Hossain's recommendations.

I think, the issue here is how much egalitarian the cadet college system is in terms of making that opportunity available to those who could meet the standard at the entry point. We know, and Mr. Hossain mentions, that meritorious students from low-income families continue to get the opportunity and receive subsidies. This aspect could be the subject of more scrutiny and research in order to come up with appropriate recommendations as to how the access could be more equitable.

Counting costs is not the appropriate premise to evaluate cadet colleges as long as cadets' "relative number in leadership positions" remains remarkable. On this last point, it seems there are good arguments to support the zestful claims of Mr. Kabir, he being the youngest of the three ex-cadet authors.

(The views expressed in the articles are personal and do not reflect any organisation)

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## Caught in a death trap

Imposition of ban on the student politics will bring a good number of positive consequences in the society. First, the government would regain its image that has been lost due to student politics. Secondly, such step would help the educational institutions to run smoothly.



PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

HOW long will parents keep losing their young children due to violence in the educational institutions? This is an important question that we all should address with great importance.

Violence among different student groups has now become a common phenomenon in the context of Bangladesh. Although student politics had its glorious past, it has lost all its glory with time. Nowadays, student politics has been characterised by conflict for power, extension of control over the administration, extortion, tendering and so on.

Since the majority of Bangladeshis live in rural areas, a vast majority of students studying in different higher educational institutions belong to the middle or lower-middle class families.

Thus, we are able to feel the pain of a middle class family who find it difficult to bear the expenses of a student. Guardians bear this pain expecting that once the

education is completed their child will get a job, which will assist the parents in the years to come.

But can we imagine the pain when they carry the dead bodies of their child, killed as a result of student violence? I can feel the pulse of it since I came from a lower-middle class family. I have one brother. My father was a middle-class businessman. After passing the SSC examination at our village both of us started our studies at Rajshahi. I could recall the miseries of my father who had to suffer a lot while supporting our studies.

Ultimately, he had to sell most of his properties as he faced many losses in his business. So, I can feel the miseries of my father. Like me, majority of the students who belong to the middle-class families should have the same feeling.

But, it is a matter of great regret to those guardians who carry the dead bodies of their young son (in most cases victims of students politics are mostly male).

A few days back, a brilliant student who came from a very poor family was

killed during an intra-group conflict of Bangladesh Chhatra League in Dhaka University. Abu Bakkar was the first boy in his class who had a strong desire and possibility to be a teacher of Dhaka University. His family members possibly dreamt of having their miseries resolved when Abu Bakkar would get a job. But all of their dreams were nipped away when he became a victim of student confrontation.

Similarly, we witnessed a brutal killing at Rajshahi University on February 8. Farouq Hossain's family had lots of expectation from him.

But most importantly, we should ask: Would there be any sort of punishments given to the killers? It is hard to say since these cases are mostly treated as political murder, where witnesses are hard to find.

One may wonder what is the significance of student politics? After 1990s, we have hardly witnessed any contribution of student politics in the country. We didn't even find any sort of resistance from the student wings of any of the political parties during the rule of the army-backed caretaker government. Instead, we witnessed a lot of devastating activities of different student groups. The ruling parties in different periods have suffered from vehement criticism from all corners due to these devastations.

Even if we concentrate on the rule of the present government, the scenario is worse. It can be said that the present government has achieved many successes, but all of their efforts have been overdriven by the activities of their student wings.

I did not find any answer as to why the government didn't impose any ban on student politics. The common people of Bangladesh will certainly appreciate such a move.

Sometimes, the government should consider the interest of the common people in excess of political advantages. In case of the government's decision on not imposing ban on student politics, I can't seem to find any political advantage. The present government has received brute majority in the election. Moreover, the opposition is not in a strong position to untablize the running government in the upcoming four years. So why is the government hesitant to take this strong action?

Imposition of ban on the student politics will bring a good number of positive consequences in the society. First, the government would regain its image that has been lost due to student politics. Secondly, such step would help the educational institutions to run smoothly. Thus there wouldn't be any session jams at the universities and no violence in campus. No parents would lose their child at the early age. Finally, it would offer some scope to the leaders of the student bodies to rectify themselves.

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## Resume dialogue with Pakistan

India must adopt a regional approach to Afghanistan. Pakistan has a legitimate interest in the welfare of the Pashtuns. Islamabad too must recognise India's stake in containing extremism and promoting stability in Afghanistan.



PRAFUL BIDWAI

DOES India have a coherent policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, which has major implications for its security? Going by recent developments, the answer is no. India is repeatedly losing opportunities to help stabilise this critical region.

The Istanbul and London conferences on Afghanistan showed India's marginalisation. India's plea against distinguishing between "good" and "bad" Taliban failed. Most players want a deal with the Taliban. American and British generals believe they can't win the war and want troops withdrawn by 2012 at the latest.

President Hamid Karzai's controversial election victory has isolated him. He had to drop his Cabinet nominees following legislature vetoes. He too wants a deal with the Taliban. Pakistan wants to broker a Taliban-West deal to gain influence.

The Anglo-American goal is to begin reconciliation by buying out the Taliban rank-and-file. Later, Taliban commanders would be integrated into the civilian fold. This would lead to power-sharing with the Quetta Shura (Taliban High Council) and full reconciliation of all groups.

The crucial assumption here is that many Taliban would defect to the Afghan National Army despite its low pay and morale. But that's unlikely given that the Taliban are confidently advancing in Afghanistan. Also, organised-group reconciliation won't prevent Mujahideen Commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and other warlords from undermining the civilian regime.

However, instead of launching a "Global War on Terror," Washington should have tried al-Qaida and its allies in the international criminal court. This would have domestically undermined them and spurred democratisation and genuine

reconciliation.

The US-led coalition didn't rebuild the Afghan people's war-ravaged lives, promote development and create governance institutions. Instead, it promoted Mr. Karzai and various warlords. When misgovernance and corruption spiralled, the coalition dumped Mr. Karzai. But it continued ignoring the Afghans' human needs.

India has run Afghanistan's best civilian assistance programme, taking note of destitution and poor infrastructure. Its aid has been delivered as directly as possible -- unlike Western aid, most of which subcontractors intercept.

India has built hospitals, schools and roads, including a highway to Iran, which would enable sea access. It's training Afghan civil servants, diplomats, legislators, judges and policemen. This has earned India tremendous goodwill.

However, India has failed to influence the US-led coalition because it tailed it -- thanks to an unsound policy, based on unrealistic assumptions about Pakistan, the US and the Taliban. India insists that the US stay on in Afghanistan and force Pakistan to act against the 26/11 Mumbai attackers and destroy the *jihadi* terrorist infrastructure.

However, the US has no real Afghanistan strategy beyond "surge and scuttle." Its alliance with Pakistan is geopolitical, with limited leverage over Islamabad.

India's insistence against "good-Taliban-bad-Taliban" differentiation belies its own experience with insurgent groups, marked by grades of extremism. There's an overlap between Pashtun and Taliban identities. Many Pashtuns feel poorly represented under Mr. Karzai and sympathise with the Taliban -- although they oppose violence.

backed by Iran and Russia. The Alliance is seen by many Pashtuns as a collaborator in Afghanistan's invasion in 2001. India must rebuild its bridges with the Pashtuns, which were historically strong, as the Badshah Khan-Gandhi relationship testifies.

India must adopt a regional approach to Afghanistan. Pakistan is critical in this. Pakistan has a legitimate interest in Afghanistan's stability and in the welfare of the Pashtuns. Islamabad too must recognise India's stake in containing extremism and promoting stability in Afghanistan. India has had ties with Afghanistan since the Gandhara civilisation, based on culture, trade, language, music and food.

India and Pakistan should acknowledge their respective and joint stakes in stabilising Afghanistan. This could best happen if Prime Minister Manmohan Singh convenes a summit in New Delhi with Presidents Zardari and Karzai to discuss peace-building, trade and transit, joint action against *jihadi* extremism, people-to-people exchanges, and economic cooperation.

The summit would help allay Pakistani fears that India might corner Pakistan through covert operations from its numerous consulates in Afghanistan.

A precondition for this is that the India-Pakistan dialogue must resume quickly. India's refusal to discuss with Pakistan issues relevant to both states and peoples is counter-productive. It has strengthened Pakistan's hawks. Mature diplomacy entails that India talks to Pakistan and encourages it to act strongly against *jihadi*.

India and Pakistan have drastically curtailed visas to each other's citizens. The sufferers are ordinary people in divided families, and civil society groups, which stand for peace, firm action against *jihadi* extremism, and cultural exchanges to promote better mutual understanding.

The India Premier League's decision to boycott Pakistani cricketers is a disgrace to cricket and to decency. New Delhi wasn't responsible for this. But it didn't help when it told Pakistan to "introspect the reasons which have put a strain on relations between India and Pakistan" and adversely affected peace and regional stability.

Such statements can only fuel anti-India sentiments in Pakistan. New Delhi can defend its legitimate interests better if there's continuing India-Pakistan engagement.

India must seize the opportunity to revive mutual dialogue at the forthcoming Saarc home ministers' meeting.

Islamabad will feel motivated to act against terrorism if India resumes dialogue and assures Pakistan through practical action that India doesn't want to marginalise it.

Last July, Dr. Singh made such a tentative effort at Sharm-al-Shaikh, but he instantly retreated over a reference to Balochistan in the joint statement with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

He must pick up the thread. Islamabad should reciprocate. Both countries deserve this.

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