

Bettering the scores at HSC

There is yet room for improvement

THE results of this year's Higher Secondary Certificate examinations are a clear cause for happiness. The reason is obvious. There has not been only a rise in the pass percentage but also an increase in the number of GPA-5 achievers. With the overall success rate of all the eight boards of education being 71.82 per cent and the number of GPA-5 achievers going up by 7,290 over the figures for last year, we think that the results augur well for the future of education in the country. There can be no denying that the standard of education at the school and college levels has been growing, with both teachers and students clearly ready and willing to put in their best efforts for maximum achievements at the exam. As for the system of teaching and examinations, it must be said that in the past few years the weaknesses which at times were noticed in them are gradually being removed and progress is really on track.

And yet it has to be noted that the achievements made by HSC examinees this year are generally focused in the urban areas. There are clear indications that it is in towns and cities that many of the best educational institutions, be they schools or colleges, happen to be located. Quite naturally, it is these institutions which have regularly demonstrated an ability to do well at the examinations. So while we can certainly say we are happy and satisfied with the performance of students at the HSC examinations this year, we must also stress the importance of schools and colleges at the thana and upazila levels improving the quality of teaching and learning within themselves in order for these institutions to be on a par with those in the urban areas. It is particularly in the matter of GPA-5 that rural schools and colleges need to do better. In other words, a further expansion of the achievement chart fundamentally means a consolidation of the curricula and teachers' training we notice at present. The results should be a new incentive for colleges across the country to give more impetus to the education imparted to their pupils through a corresponding degree of improvement in the quality of their teachers.

The results of the SSC and HSC examinations in recent times have shown a patent enhancement in the quality of education in Bangladesh. Of particular significance is the fact that it is in English, a subject at which many students feel vulnerable, where marked improvement can be seen this year. We consider it an encouraging development. Let the education system, as it moves on, be a focused one and let no partisan political considerations, of whatever hue, mar such a purposeful enterprise.

We wish the successful HSC examinees a smooth passage to higher education in the days and weeks ahead. As they enter the university, we trust they will pursue a productive, undisturbed course of studies. An educated citizenry is a guarantee of future collective progress. Let no one miss this cardinal lesson.

Revenue collection up

Unrealised potential awaits tapping in on

THIS is for the third time in the last ten years that the National Board of Revenue (NBR) met the revenue collection target it had set for itself -- for the fiscal 2009-10. The amount collected stood at Tk 62,007.47 crore reflecting a growth of 18 percent over that of the last fiscal. In fact, it has exceeded the target by a margin of Tk 1,007 crore plus. This is not to forget, however, that part of the increase in revenue is due to Tk 121.2 crore collected as tax on whitening of Tk 923 crore in black money. The point to remember is also that poor collection from undisclosed incomes persists as a problem, partly legalistic and partly political, perhaps.

All the same, the NBR's performance is praiseworthy. A substantial increase to the kitty has come from VAT, income tax and supplementary duty. It is not without significance though that travel tax collection dwindled. It is important to note that revised rates of VAT and customs duty have helped push up the revenues. That leaves the focus on how efficient the NBR has been in its collection efforts, procedure-wise and administratively?

It augurs well that 3.43 lakh new tax-payers have entered the stream during the last ten months. Economists and planners, however, believe that substantial unrealised potential in garnering more tax from new sources and individuals remains in a country of our population size and diversification of income generating efforts.

To realise the full potential of domestic resource mobilisation, NBR's internal mechanisms will have to be modernised and rendered collection-friendly. We have often heard about modernising the collection process through automation. But nothing has taken root as yet on the ground. It is our belief that use of online technology would not only help ensure transparency but better collection as well. Alongside, the need for strengthening the central intelligence cell to spot evasion under the overall superintendence of an incorruptible and professionally sound authority can hardly be overemphasised.

The extra-judicial mindset

Law enforcement is a field of activity in which interaction between the world of the powerful and the world of the powerless is manifested. Hence, we have to ensure that law enforcement emphasises principles of purpose and principles of values.

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DEATHS in police custody under circumstances not satisfactorily explained, mysterious disappearance of alleged suspects and their subsequent deaths, raising disturbing suspicions about the conduct of sworn individuals in the law enforcement organ or the casualties in the so-called crossfire are engaging the public mind. The one positive facet of a very ominous scenario is the recent judicial hauling up of a number of delinquent lawmen indulging in extra-judicial misdeeds.

Corrective actions to stall and deter patently illegal acts like deaths in authority's custody or the extra-judicial killing have come late, one has to admit. The belated actions, caused principally by the outcry in the media and vehement protests of the civil society, while not being a matter of comfort to concerned citizens, should prompt us to venture into the state of mind and circumstances that have contributed to the building of a lamentable extra-judicial mindset.

The question as to why lawmen resort to short-cut and extra-legal methods in their statutory functions should, at the least, be a subject of intellectual curiosity. Is it ambiguous legislation, vulnerability to legal sanctions, occupational culture and pressure to produce quick results? Does the malfunctioning of the criminal justice system push people to expect, nay demand, of the police to take laws in their own hands, especially when dealing with the dreaded terrorists and hard-core criminals?

It is not uncommon to see in our situation demands for ruthless counter measures, irrespective of the price that has to be paid in terms of human rights. Thus,

abuse of authority in such situations can flourish, not only due to official negligence or acquiescence but, rightly or wrongly, also because broad sections of people consider that in spite of their excesses the police are carrying out an important and unpleasant task for the preservation of society and state. The question is, have our enforcement leaders and their political controllers made visible efforts to halt this kind of drift?

There are also occasions when situations of grave emergency create a scenario wherein demands of order override those of liberty. Some say that the safety of the people is the highest law and, as such, in grave situations, special emergency measures have to be adopted curtailing rights of the people. The issue is whether our political leaders realise that even in times of emergency there are certain non-violable rights to life and liberty, freedom from torture etc.

One has to ask if lawless police officers are in demand when lawlessness and disorder prevail in an area. Are believers in the rule of law and followers of straight legal methods considered to be "cows" and "sissies," and are not adjudged fit enough to deal with explosive situations because a police officer working within the limits of rule of law needs to put in sustained efforts to achieve durable results?

Experience shows that a lawful police officer succeeds in displaying substantial results in the long-run, but most people are interested in short-term, spectacular results even though they may be illusory.

In fact, our expectations, compatible with the rule of law, of the police are at total variance with our actual expectations compatible with the rule of order. This double standard makes one believe that the police's chief value lies in effi-



Law enforcement.

cient enforcement of the prohibitive norms of substantive criminal law.

The issue of police modernisation becomes relevant when we witness our lawmen indulging in third-degree methods. Don't we appreciate that the so-called efficient and traditional police force will not do and that, like the defence services, it should be equipped with modern equipment and staffed with desirable people? How long shall we put up with an outfit that appears largely to by-pass the constructive impulses of science and technology?

It needs to be impressed once again that the practice of breaking the law in the name of law enforcement is totally unacceptable and intolerable and has no place in a democratic society governed by the rule of law. It is objectionable because it is arbitrary as a process and random in its effects.

A democratic polity venturing to maintain order by repression and criminality is actually creating ultimate disorder because, in so doing, it creates a link between social order and atrocities.

Law enforcement is a field of activity in which interaction between the world of the powerful and the world of the powerless is manifested. Hence, we have to ensure that law enforcement emphasises principles of purpose and principles of values. We must come out of the degrading thought that those who cannot be taken care of within the ambit of law have to be dealt with beyond the law.

A new police act that lays down in no uncertain terms that the duties of the police include safeguarding people's rights is urgently necessary. It is time to insulate the police from extraneous pressures and yet make it accountable to the people.

A neutral and non-political police force can perform its duties in an efficient and impartial manner and function as a powerful protector of human rights. This needs political will and commitment, and also strong public pressure on the government to bring about systemic reforms.

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Do ministers' visits help?

When the missions on both sides have too many undercover agents, a war of the spies has been seen. When one country declares an officer persona non-grata, followed by deportation, then there is retaliation from the other side. India and Pakistan have gone through this exercise many a time

KULDIP NAYAR

FORMER Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral would always say that a solution between Pakistan and India had to be evolved, not presented to the people as if a magician had pulled a rabbit out of the bag. He had a point. The two sides, particularly the politicians and the establishments, had to gulp down the solution and chew it, a slow process.

It is like a building, which is erected brick by brick. Therefore, people-to-people contact is the obvious way out for the two countries to discuss and debate at length the various issues facing them, without even reaching a consensus of any sort.

My experience shows that the contact is confined to those who can get a visa or are lucky enough to be part of Track II committee. Governments on both sides are frustratingly cussed and slow. They have hardly left any scope for contact among the common people on both sides. India's home ministry is further tightening visa eligibility criteria so that it can keep out "unwanted elements."

Norms under discussion indicate income criteria and minimum educational qualifications for entry into India. This is an approach meant to allow only the elite. I thought that the home ministry would facilitate the exchange of newspapers, which has been stopped since the 1965 war. (In Pakistan, the dissemination of Indian television news is banned.)

The meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries is a step forward after the talks between the two home ministers and foreign secretaries. What they say and the steps they take are important for the normalisation of relations between the two countries. And they should do it quickly because the people want normalisation without further loss of time.

Yet, the most important thing is disabusing the minds on both sides. The feeling of national solidarity is nurtured on the two sides by emphasising on the "misdeeds of the other side." When nationalism feeds on downing the "enemy," there is little hope in building an atmosphere of confidence. Nationalism, in fact, is prejudice.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's

remark that "trust and verify" the sincerity of Pakistan may be justified because of India's "feeling of betrayal" after many unsuccessful attempts to reach an understanding. Yet, it only underlines the depth of distrust.

Who is to verify what and how? These are ambiguous questions and should not be raised when the two countries are yet to outline even the agenda of talks. New Delhi does not want to give them the name of a "composite" dialogue, the phrase that Pakistan prefers.

People in both the countries have to overcome the memory of partition's traumatic experience. Happenings of those days are still being passed by one generation to the other. I can tell you from my experiences -- I travelled from Sialkot to Amritsar on September 13, 1947 -- that there was no difference between the Hindus and Muslims in killing and looting members of the other community. They killed 10 lakh people and uprooted nearly 2 crore families.

I was pained to see the Pakistan establishment telling one side of the story. It has put up boards at the Wagha border to show how Muslims were killed by the Hindus and Sikhs. The Muslims were no less guilty. It would be better to consider that incident an aberration in a long history of amity between Hindus and Muslims.

But the tragedy of partition is only renewed again and again when the Pakistani textbooks arouse hatred against Indian people, not the state. Although the observations have been reportedly toned down, they still talk about "India's evil designs against Pakistan" and "identifying the events in relation to Hindu-Muslim differences."

How can the children forget what is taught to them in schools? They carry the same impression when they grow up. It is time that both countries set up a joint commission to go through the textbooks and give directives to those who prepare them.

No doubt, such a step will do away with the hatred cultivated at a young age. Yet, because of the fear of a small state that Pakistan has been, the natural fallout of partition is understandable. It feels pitted against a big state -- India.



Indian foreign minister S M Krishna in Islamabad meeting premier Gilani

years after the formation of the country, that New Delhi wants to destroy their entity. This thinking gives grist to the propaganda mills of extremist organisations.

Civil societies in both the countries have to fight against the feeling; will Pakistan survive the difficulties it faces? I am reminded of what Atal Behari Vajpayee wrote on the visitors' book at Minar-e-Pakistan: "India's integrity and prosperity depends on the integrity and prosperity of Pakistan."

The prisoners on both sides are a sad commentary on the attitude of rulers and bureaucrats. Indian and Pakistani prisoners languish in jails long after their sentence is over. The crime of most of them is that they had strayed into the other country.

Poor fishermen particularly have become victims in the "hostile" atmosphere. The fishermen of Gujarat and Diu in India and Pakistan's Sind suffer the worst. Unknowingly, they enter into the other's water and get arrested. As of now, there are around 560 Indian fishermen in Pakistan prisons and more than 150 Pakistani fishermen in Indian jails.

Of those arrested, 95% are from Gujarat and Diu while a higher percentage is from the Sind province of Pakistan. Generally, they become pawns in the hands of political leadership of the other country. They are released only when the leadership in

either country feels it is politically beneficial to do so. Though both countries accept that they are innocent, yet they continue to stay in each other's country's prison for a long period.

When the missions on both sides have too many undercover agents, a war of the spies has been seen. When one country declares an officer persona non-grata, followed by deportation, then there is retaliation from the other side. India and Pakistan have gone through this exercise many a time when intelligence persons were deported in large numbers.

I still believe that people-to-people contact on a wide-scale will improve the situation in the two countries and lessen the fear, suspicion and mistrust. But I do not see such a possibility in the near future because terrorism has changed the scenario.

It is true that Pakistan is a prey to it. But so many reports by the US think-tanks have said that the Taliban, who attack Pakistani cities at regular intervals, are trained and funded by elements, including the ISI, from within Pakistan.

Now that both New Delhi and Islamabad are determined to fight against terrorism jointly, with the help of other Saarc nations, some kind of mechanism should be created to eliminate the Taliban.

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