

BITTER TRUTH

A sound base for primary education



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E DUCATION is a basic tool for self-defence in modern society. The feeling of powerlessness that goes with being illiterate comes through loud and clear in any conversation with ordinary people.

With 50% of the students dropping out before completing class V, as revealed in a

seminar in the recent past, it will be a challenge for the government to implement its pledge of achieving 100% literacy by 2014. The reasons for such appalling condition of elementary education in rural Bangladesh have been linked to a supposed lack of parental motivation compounded by past governments' apathy in creating a suitable infrastructure that can inspire children to be in school. It is partly true that poor parents, perhaps illiterate themselves, are not interested in education.

But the situation has changed greatly. Parents these days are not apathetic to education, and child labour does not seem to be a major obstacle also, then why are so many students out of school?

Education, whatever the government version may be, is still expensive. While free education is a constitutional right and books are free of cost, there are expenses for paper, transportation and food. Some findings suggested that for an average agricultural labourer, sending two children to primary school would cost about 10 to 15 days wages at the minimum.

The financial burden has a discouraging effect on the schooling of girls. While parents recognise that it is important for a girl to be educated, many feel that the benefits will be enjoyed by others, since a daughter

typically leaves her family after marriage. This outlook leads to a reluctance to spend on a daughter's education.

Effort is required to motivate a child to go to school, to ensure that he or she makes progress and to free him or her of domestic chores. The willingness of parents and children to make the required effort depends on what they can expect to get in return, in terms of schooling quality, which is, more often than not, abysmal.

There are many reasons for this. For a start, the physical infrastructure is woefully inadequate. The state of school buildings is the main reason why children are not drawn to school. Many of them have leaking roofs, making it difficult to hold classes during rains. In some schools, classes are held under trees during the dry season and are closed during rainy season.

With only three or four teachers for 200 to 250 students, how much attention can a student hope to receive from his or her teacher? One finding shows that children who have read up to class V are unable to read or write.

An expert committee constituted by the education ministry attributed the reason for the poor performance in the just concluded Junior School Certificate (JSC) and Junior Dakhil Certificate (JDC) examinations to shortage of efficient teachers in English and mathematics. English is hardly taught even at the secondary stage, and there is a dearth of competent teachers and standard textbooks for all stages.

Education from the primary to secondary level has become a low priority subject. Persons in authority speak volumes about improvement and launch ambitious programmes, but precious little has



A.N. AHADY/DRINKNEWS

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been achieved so far.

A report in a Bangla daily on February 26 said that there are 225 vacancies for headmaster in government primary schools, and only 49 assistant headmasters against the existing 460 vacant posts.

Although the education minister speaks of a silent revolution coming about in the education front, it is still not visible. For that to happen, it needs the commitment of the teachers backed by strong motivation of the school managing committee and parents alike, with financial support from the government.

The stark reality is that teachers' quality and teaching ability are also abysmal because many of them found their way to the teaching profession, which was not to their

liking and interest. A report published in *The Prothom Alo* on February 18, showed that in Badarganj upazila of Rangpur, teachers of 81 government primary schools participated in the electioneering campaign of the Teachers' Association without taking any class for one month. It seems nothing happened to those teachers, who played truant like the kids.

The most important component for the silent revolution, or more correctly speaking the knowledge revolution, that our education minister espouses is mass literacy.

Surprisingly, the concerned ministry now spends more time fiddling around with the contents of textbooks than with trying to gauge how much literacy has either been

achieved or can be achieved.

The recent move by the government to provide laptops and multimedia projectors to 20,500 public and private educational institutions by 2012 seems to be an ambitious programme when the very base of the primary education is tottering. We are going ahead with these projects at the time when we don't have regular supply of electricity. Nor do we have trained manpower to repair the faults in case of simple breakdown of these laptops.

Instead of pouring money into such wasteful projects, they should have been building primary schools worth their name in the far flung areas of the country. There should have been a serious attempt to build proper schools with adequate

number of rooms instead of allowing most school children to manage without buildings and huddle together in one or two rooms.

The education sector is corruption-ridden, messy and chaotic. Many institutions have been pushed to the ropes by dearth of qualified and competent teachers, nepotism and political consideration in recruiting teachers, and lack of supervisory control in teaching and running the institution. How do you introduce computers or provide laptop to schools that function under trees? How do you explain internet in a country where literacy still means being able to sign your name?

The most important step at this stage should be to establish exactly which areas of the country have lagged behind and why. The best schools are those that use English as the medium of instruction. Most traditional vernacular schools, because of resource crunch and declining quality of teaching, are out of touch with the modern methods of education.

This pinpoints the responsibility of the government, which must provide in public education what parents are now obliged to buy privately. At the same time, the government, through introduction of attractive pay structure for the teachers, must take effective steps in putting a curb on private tuition by teachers at all levels at the expense of class room teaching. This will promote egalitarianism among students and restore an atmosphere of fair education.

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Living in a time of change

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S LINGING mud at opponents is a staple of our democracy, although most voters prefer sensible debate on the hardest national issues. The moral majority sincerely yearn that the government put the economic crisis before politics. In fact, it is evident that some of our politicians are spending a lot of time vacillating, arguing whilst being loud and disagreeable, whereas democracy needs leaders with the inclination and ability to adjust and compromise. Democracy in the absence of other desirables, like the independence of the judiciary; rule of law; free press and fair elections, often limits a country's progress. Our democracy needs defending.

Most political observers think that the opposition parties are yet to succeed in finding new issues with major appeal, but it appears that the ruling party is determined to provide political ammunition to their opponents so as to allow them to reduce our democracy to a ruthless struggle for power only. Unsurprisingly, there is no indication that the new leadership is gaining ground within the BNP. They yet to produce a real road map for economic recovery or sustainable growth. On the contrary, we are seeing the same old faces finding new packages for the old goods.

This government should have no illusions about the challenges ahead of them. Traditionally, of course, economic issues have been among the major concerns of our voters. Prices of staples are now the most frequently mentioned issue, which will surely influence voter's decisions. However, it would be mistake to believe the BNP will be able to rein in food prices, while the skyrocketing throughout the world.

There are almost no major issues where the BNP is seen by voters as having very distinctive policy solution of their own. However, we all know that voter's loyalties are on the whole emotional in character, rather than based on any calculation of where their interests lay.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh has two adversarial political parties. The two-party system is not only secure for, but also much praised by, the political opportunists. Their alternation in power has become the norm in our country. Each party has to wait only for the next turn of the wheel of electoral fortune so they can return to power and neatly uproot the policies of their predecessors, dig in their

own. Sometimes important changes of policy occur without reference to elections. Unlike the UK or India, there is no intermediate party to serve as a home for protest votes. Naturally, dissatisfied voters under an incumbent government switch directly to the opposition party.

Our electoral system known as 'first past the post' discourages other parties to take hold. Indeed throughout the Western world, governing has become a shared responsibility between parties, as they believe that the challenges they are bigger than party or politics. At stake right now is not who wins the next election, rather whether we can make a clean break with the past and transform the way Bangladesh had been run for decades to pull the nation out of its years-long stasis.

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future we want to have and remain passive, the future will surely shape us in a way we may regret. We deserve the chance to shape our own destiny. The future is ours to win; we really don't want to remain trapped by our past, especially as our international standing has risen and Bangladesh is now seen as a democratic bastion against religious extremists.

Our proximity to Asian economies like India and China is an important economic strength. The success story of economic development is likely to spread beyond China and India to other emerging countries, Bangladesh being uniquely poised to be a growth star, should our leaders combine the power of technology, and imagination, to address the fundamental problems the country faces today.

Our success in this new and changing

world requires new skills and new ideas. We got to mobilise our talents and assemble teams of the best and brightest minds to heal the ills of our country.

Scientists, engineers and intellectuals are known as nation builders in many countries. It is time that we treat our luminaries with the same level of respect. By maintaining leadership in research and development, the USA has become the greatest nation on Earth.

Pundit Nehru, the longest serving prime minister of India (1947 until 1964) used to take advice from Milton Friedman, the most influential economist of the second half of the 20th century, although Jawaharlal Nehru was an advocate for Fabian socialism and Friedman emphasized the advantages of free market.

Interestingly, Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress Party and most powerful figure in Indian politics, invited another Nobel laureate for economics, Joseph Stiglitz, on 19th November, 2010 to provide policy guidance to the government of India. Stiglitz is one of the most frequently cited economists in the world.

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You don't have to look too far in Bangladesh to see what confrontation can bring. Bangladesh may not be the best place to be a Nobel laureate. For Dr Muhammad Yunus, perhaps it is a terrifying nightmare.

Understandably, we cannot expect our politicians to behave more like scholars, but regrettably, when they appoint some scholars for policy recommendations, such scholars easily become too politicized and tend to bend the facts and figures to suit the wishes of those in charge. On the other hand, academics with high moral integrity can't withstand the battering of a democratic government either.

We are living in a time of great change. One of the biggest changes in 2011 will be China outperforming America as the biggest manufacturer. But China too could find itself being overtaken by India in economic growth. We are really proud of our neighbours. We also like to be on board.

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Charlie Sheen's guide to life



T HE World's most famous hell-raiser strikes again. A reader told me last week that she had changed her mind about sending her kids to university in the West "because of Charlie Sheen."

Huh? That didn't make sense to me. I told her the drug-addled actor was "just one person in one place. He doesn't visit every student at every university in every country to encourage them to behave as badly as he does."

She was unpersuaded. "He might," she said. "He could travel."

Later, I realised she was right. Charlie Sheen is already everywhere, whispering in every ear. By being a stupid, evil egomaniac, he's made himself the number one celebrity gossip topic around the world against amazing opposition.

But there are others like him. For example, I'm guessing that property developers are reading this and asking themselves a question: "I too am a stupid, evil egomaniac. Why am I not as famous as Charlie Sheen?"

Good question. In my opinion, Mr. Sheen has an edge over the rest of us, because he is mad in both senses of the word: angry and possibly insane.

This is the man who responded to being sacked by requesting a \$1 million pay rise. This is a guy who regularly hints that he is not from earth.

Top three Charlie Sheen quotes:

1. "You can't process me with a normal brain."
2. "My brain fires in a way that is, I don't know, maybe not from this particular terrestrial realm."
3. "I'm tired of pretending like I'm not special. I'm tired of pretending like I'm not bitchin', a total freakin' rock star from Mars."

No, wait. I think that last one might be from Confucius.

But of course all communities have their

own Charlie Sheens, grossly misbehaving children of bad parents.

- India has Shaan Uttamsingh, mayhem-causing grandson of Bollywood film producer G.P. Sippy.
- China has bad driver Li Qiming, famous for trying to escape manslaughter charges with the phrase "My father is Li Gang."
- Japan has Hello Kitty, who has been dressing inappropriately in recent months.

People maddened by anger are scary. On Monday last week, a burglar broke into a home in the US state of Oregon, I learn from a link sent by a reader. The homeowner was so furious that the terrified intruder locked himself in the bathroom and called the cops.

I wonder what he said? "Police? I broke into this house in Portland and found a guy with a gun and two dogs who is angry with me about something."

A different reader told me a similar tale, about a bungling trio of thieves who broke into a house in the western suburbs of Delhi on January 28. The homeowner was out, but neighbours spotted them and an angry crowd soon gathered, anxious to dispense instant justice. Again, the thieves phoned the police. "Come and arrest us," they said. "And hurry."

Going back to angry, misbehaving celebs, I'm not surprised that Mr. Sheen, Mel Gibson and John Galliano were all told to take anger management classes.

But did you know that little Demi Lovato, the Disney actress who started as a cute child in Barney the Dinosaur, last week also completed such a course? Apparently, she was forced into it after she beat some guy up. I hope it was Barney.

Last night, my neighbour told me she was taking anger management classes. I was amazed -- she was patient, sweet-natured, intelligent woman. She told me that everyone gets angry, and everyone could use help managing it. Some let it explode on the outside, while others internalise it. Apparently, it's often the quiet ones who seem like they have no visible tempers at all, who have the most problems. That explains Hello Kitty, perhaps.

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