

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Sleeping giant, wake up



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

TWO facts stand out signifying a growing interest among our young people to know more about our Liberation War: Books on our freedom struggle topped the selling chart of the recently concluded Boi Mela. Earlier on, *Guerrilla*, a movie that had received best Asian film award in Kolkata, drew a record number of young viewers in Dhaka.

Clearly, the quest of the post-liberation generation for a better understanding of our ethos and identity is a welcome precursor to helping them overcome a certain crisis of identity that divisive politics has foisted on them.

Add to this, the advantages of being Internet generation:

- The free flow of information and instant access to the global repository of knowledge pit them against their counterparts on a scale of comparison. That way they can do some comparative evaluation and determine their status in terms of equivalence. In the process, they are rediscovering themselves from a global perspective making them feel like de facto world citizens;
- They are observing literally at first hand the hard times the one-time El Dorado's are going through with the result that the prospects of immigration are being circumscribed. That should give the motivation and a breather to look and stay focused inwards and develop ourselves based on our resources, much of which is untapped and

wasted through corruption and lack of leadership;

- That in a hostile world environment our future lies with our own country is dawning on many young people, so we can unleash their latent talent and energy for rapid nation-building.
- There is so much work to do in Bangladesh and yet we are plagued by so much unemployment and under-employment -- that is the biggest tragedy we are having to live with;
- Thanks to Internet, we get a blow by blow account of the worldwide surge among the young generations for securing political, social and economic justice in their own countries. Though the angle may have been slanted and the interpretations need not be taken at face value, the fact remains that the sufferers of injustice are voicing their discontent.

Our younger generations who had stood by the people in defense of their rights to justice and fairplay anytime these were threatened in the past have undergone a role change. True, in colonial times of the Pakistani vintage there had been causes to fight for, and the students were at the vanguard of popular movements championing them. The present generation is apt to ask: Where are those causes now in the self-governing context to make a fight for? This is an excuse and a fallacy. For, hasn't national

independence been followed by versions of its own forms of autocratic behaviour, injustice, assault on rule of law, violation of human rights, expropriation of national wealth, increased rich-poor gap, communal propensities? The list is endless.

What are the student communities doing now? Once political leadership had grown out of the portals of the universities; now the parliament is predominantly made up of businessmen. That is saying a lot about the change in leadership composition.

At the heart of leadership problems lies discontinuation of DUCSU and hall elections ever since 1990. How could this happen? It is all because of replacement of the system of elections

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by ruling party student wings alternatively and arbitrarily taking over facades of DUCSU and hall unions. At the student level national winning parties' protégées take it all like their parenting parties do at the national level.

There are other functional reasons for stalling student union elections. The aging student leaders perpetuate their authority on student committees as a matter of political plus business proposition. Pathologically averse to losing clout they are unwilling to yield their places to elected leadership.

Besides, a properly elected DUCSU would have had four co-opted members to the Senate risking

them to be answerable to the university authorities.

If Dhaka University catches cold, the other universities sneeze. Thus, the same order of business reigns in academic institutions across the country. What you have therefore is an imposed, self-selected, pampered and thoroughly irrelevant student leadership anywhere you look at the educational landscape. They certainly do not represent the general students. They should gracefully bow out of scene now -- earning the nation's gratitude.

This is an anathema to a democratic country with a long tradition of elected student leaderships up until 1990. By their constitutions, the DUCSU and the hall unions would have arranged inter-hall cultural competitions including drama festivals that used to bring out the best in our younger generations. Then talent and excellence used to be showcased for its own sake cutting across party lines. But no more. The culture of refinement has taken a back seat to opportunistic drives among, yes, still a minority of students.

A vast majority of the student community are still unspoiled. They should strongly voice a demand for student union elections. And, if the national political parties have the best interests of the student community in their minds they should put their heads together to restore elections to the universities at all levels. Apart from grooming leadership at the appropriate level, this will gain bonus points through cleansing the academic atmosphere and helping our universities restore their former glories as centres of excellence.

Our sleeping giant wake up.

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Harnessing the past, enriching the future

SIR FAZLE HASAN ABED

THE year 2012 marks forty years of Brac's existence. In these four decades since its inception in February 1972 as a small relief and rehabilitation project in a remote corner of Bangladesh, Brac has grown to become the largest and one of the most successful development organisations in the world. This watershed moment, therefore, provides an opportunity for us to reflect on these last 40 years and look ahead to the challenges that will confront us in the years ahead.

Having come into formal existence within months of each other, Brac's story is inextricably linked to Bangladesh's story. When Brac started its journey in the immediate aftermath of our War of Liberation, Bangladesh was a country in ruin. Whatever little infrastructure there was had been destroyed during the nine month war, and the economy was left in shambles. Although the odds were many, and seemingly insurmountable, we felt that if we could tap into the palpable sense of optimism in those early days of our nation, and effectively channel the amazing resilience of our people, we would be able to overcome those challenges. We understood that if we could help people to realise their potential, they would be their own actors in history, and write their own stories of triumph over adversity.

Over the last forty years, the people of this country have written those stories over and over again. In almost every major indicator of human development, Bangladesh's progress has been remarkable. Let me highlight just a few.

At the time of our independence, our health indicators were some of the worst in the world. Today, the progress we have made is the envy of most of the developing nations in South Asia and beyond. In these last 40 years, infant mortality in Bangladesh has come down from 200 to less than 50, maternal mortality from 800 to less than 200, and average life expectancy at birth has risen from 40 to 65. Fertility, which was as high as 6.5 in 1972, has fallen to 2.7.

While it is true that no single organisation can take credit for this amazing turnaround, Brac can nevertheless take great pride in the role that it has played in support of governmental efforts to bringing about these successes. From immunising children to popularising the use of oral rehydration therapy, from providing essential healthcare through a cadre of 80,000 barefoot health volunteers to providing safe places for mothers to give birth, from curing tuberculosis to improving sanitation, Brac's work in public health has contributed to each of our country's achievements in the health sector.

In the last 40 years, Bangladesh has gone from having a literacy rate of just 25% to over 65%. We are also one of the first countries in the developing world to have achieved gender parity in primary school completion, the second of the Millennium Development Goals. In the education sector, as in health, Brac's role in Bangladesh's progress is significant. To date, over 5 million children, more than 60% of them girls, have graduated from Brac primary schools and an overwhelming majority have gone into the public school system, performing, on average, better than their mainstream peers. Brac today operates the largest secular non-formal education system in the world, with 30,000 primary and 15,000 pre-primary schools. In addition, Brac University,

which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2011 and will hold its 7th convocation next week, is fast building a reputation as a centre of excellence for higher education and research in the country.

At the time of our independence, Bangladesh's total labour force, formal and informal sectors combined, stood at 22 million. Four decades on, although our population has doubled, total labour force has increased by more than 3 times. A large portion of this increase can be attributed to the increased participation of women in the paid labour market.

Once again, Brac can take immense pride in the work it has done in facilitating employment generation for millions of the poor, through providing

circumstances and conditions made Brac uniquely positioned to lend a hand.

Our early successes in Afghanistan gave us the confidence to start programmes in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami, and then in Uganda and Tanzania from 2006. Today, Brac operates in 9 countries in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, adapting and replicating our models in education, health, microfinance and agricultural development. Although challenges remain, we are promise bound to do everything necessary to contribute to the development of the countries in which we operate.

Though our achievements are many, the challenges that we must now face are numerous and increasingly complex. It is, therefore, important that



Sir Fazle Hasan Abed with students of a BRAC primary school.

access to credit, access to training and inputs, and access to markets. In our efforts to create jobs for the poor, Brac has pioneered several industries in Bangladesh and provided the base for private sector investment. These industries include, among others, handicrafts, poultry, dairy and seeds.

At Brac, we have never shied away from doing business whenever we have seen prospects for job creation and improving access and opportunities for the poor and disadvantaged. Our social enterprises and investments have created thousands of jobs and provided market linkages for hundreds of thousands of rural entrepreneurs. Surpluses earned from these social enterprises and investments have also reduced Brac's dependence on donor funding. Today, donor funding accounts for less than 30% of Brac's annual budget of over \$1 billion.

In 2002, exactly ten years ago, Brac went international with the start of operations in Afghanistan. Then, as in Bangladesh in 1972, we found a country ravaged by war and struggling to cope with the many challenges of nation building. Also, as in Bangladesh in 1972, we saw millions of refugees returning to the country after the fall of the Taliban regime. We realised that our experience of working in similar cir-

umstances and conditions made Brac uniquely positioned to lend a hand. While it is true that Bangladesh has shown a magnificent capacity to overcome adversity, we will continue to face new sets of challenges arising out of overpopulation, urbanisation and climate change.

In Bangladesh and in the other countries in which we work, the challenges of the future will require new and innovative solutions. I believe that in order to meet these challenges of the future, we have to tap the tremendous potential of the younger generation. Brac is in the process of developing a comprehensive strategy to help the vibrant, innovative and entrepreneurial younger generation of today to realise their potential, and be the agents of change within their communities.

Unfortunately, public education systems in most developing countries are unfit and unsuited to prepare our youth for the 21st century knowledge society that we must aspire to. Outdated approaches to teaching must give way to new techniques that teach our children not to memorise texts, but to think critically and solve problems creatively. We must give greater thought, and direct greater resources towards early childhood development, and social and emotional learning. We must also deploy tech-

nology to provide the highest quality of education to the remotest parts of the world. I am happy to report that Brac has started to work on all of these fronts.

Despite the progress made in the health sector, a mother is still 30 times more likely to die at childbirth in Bangladesh than in Norway. The quality of healthcare professionals remains poor and the state of health infrastructure outside our main cities is deplorable. We must, therefore, invest heavily in human resources and infrastructure to ensure access to affordable, quality healthcare for our citizens. In addition to doctors, we need to train and deploy thousands of nurses and mid-wives to serve our people better.

I strongly believe that gender equality remains the greatest unfinished agenda not only of my life's work but of our time. Although we have worked for the last 40 years to try to ensure that all citizens can live with dignity and respect and enjoy equal rights as human beings, I am sorry to say that patriarchy remains entrenched in our social and religious practices. Even today, women work more for less pay than men and are systematically excluded from certain professions and roles. The majority of girls in Bangladesh get married in their teens, and over a third of them become victims of domestic violence. I consider the subjugation of half of the world's population to be the greatest injustice in the history of humankind. In order to right this wrong, we must fight patriarchy in all of its manifestations, and I hope that Brac and all of us who are associated with it will continue to be at the forefront of this fight.

Over the course of my work, it has become increasingly clear to me that communities and nations develop only when everyone does their part. Particularly in a poor country like ours, we cannot always wait for the government to provide all the essential services, or for the private sector to create all the jobs. At the same time, development can never be achieved by the citizen sector alone in the absence of good governance and a robust private sector. Real, sustainable development is achieved only when the public, private and citizen sectors collaborate together and work in cohort. That is why we at Brac have partnered with the government, other development organisations and the private sector on wide-ranging issues from immunisation and tuberculosis control to teachers' training and human rights advocacy. Our experience in these speaks volumes about what can be achieved when such collaborations do take place. I hope that we will continue to make necessary linkages and work together with the public and private sectors in Bangladesh and beyond to improve opportunities for our people.

In these twilight years of my life, I feel a sense of comfort and satisfaction in knowing that we have an able and competent leadership team at Brac. I am confident that this team will ensure Brac achieves even greater success and impact when I call time on providing leadership to this organisation that I have built. To them, I would like to say: Brac should always pride itself in being a trailblazing organisation, so don't ever slow down, don't ever stop innovating, and most importantly, don't ever lose sight of the mission to extend a hand to those who need it most.

The writer is founder and chairperson of BRAC.