

Grooming youth for leadership

AHMED A. AZAD

IN the face of numerous perennial problems, Bangladesh remains a country with high potential due to its resilient and resourceful people. Its population of over 150 million, instead of being considered a burden, could be its biggest asset as about a third of them are adults below the age of 40, a very valuable human resource. This group has already made huge contributions to development and, if properly educated and trained, is capable of bringing about a revolutionary transformation of Bangladeshi society.

Bangladeshis remember with pride the glorious role that the youth and students played in securing its linguistic, cultural and national identity. That image has unfortunately taken a severe battering in recent times. A serious discussion is warranted to repair this damage and grow selfless leadership from within an enlightened student community. Equally important is the little appreciated role that youth from the poorer and disadvantaged sections of Bangladeshi society continue to play in national development and how this could be much enhanced with need-based education and training.

Young workers on the farms have transformed a country that was termed an international "basket case" into one that is now almost self-sufficient in food. Poverty and lack of job opportunities in rural areas compel young people to leave their homes to seek employment in already overcrowded cities or move overseas where they live very insecure lives but send money back home. Grossly underpaid garment workers, predominantly young females, have enabled the readymade garment industry to become the highest export earner in the country. The highest foreign remittances (\$ 12 billion in 2011) come from unskilled young workers in the Middle East and Eastern Asia. This benefits the government by decreasing the number of unemployed youth and at the same time filling their coffers.

Since the relatively healthy foreign currency reserve has been built largely through the sweat and tears of disadvantaged youth, the government has a moral obligation to use at least a fair portion of this to create jobs within the country, build local infrastructure, build capacity, and establish need-driven educational and training facilities so that future generations have a better and more fulfilling life. Instead, much of the foreign currency earned by the poor garment workers and migrants is used to repay foreign debt, much of which is incurred by the import of fuel and luxury goods and in maintaining extravagant lifestyle of the elite.

A recent World Bank study has projected that in order to maintain its economic growth Bangladesh needs to create 1.2 million new jobs every year for the next 20 years. Oblivious to this, there seems to be a national obsession with manpower export as an easy way to earn foreign currency. But there is little concern about the welfare of these poor migrant workers or their rehabilitation and employment on their return home. While overseas, these young migrants help to build the infrastructures and economies of their host countries while their skills are desperately needed back in Bangladesh. Now all the talk is about sending semi-skilled workers, and even health professionals desperately needed in Bangladesh, abroad as the remittances are expected to be much higher.

As a poor country with very little natural resources, Bangladesh needs to rely more than others on developing a knowledge and technology-

based economy. Even when jobs are available in Bangladesh many young professionals, educated at public expense, choose to migrate for a better life in the West, which has an acute shortage of trained manpower. However, the remittance of professional migrants is relatively very small so their exodus is a net loss to Bangladesh's economy. Due to lack of jobs and opportunities at home, there is a very debilitating brain drain of trained young scientists and technologists who end up creating wealth for the developed countries of the West instead of their own.

To become a technology-competent middle income country (Vision 2021), Bangladesh needs to adequately educate its youth and create suitable and satisfying employment for all of them. The highest priority should be to produce sufficient numbers of trained teachers, health professionals, agricultural scientists, and technologists. They need to be deployed primarily to the rural areas and provided with decent salaries, incentives and facilities to keep them there. Curricula and training should not be aimed at the job market in the West but closely aligned to national needs. In order to stop and reverse the brain drain a work environment needs to be built that is conducive to the retention of the best brains in the country and the return home of bright

in matters of national importance without becoming lackeys or enforcers of political parties. Student leaders were highly respected as they concerned themselves with student welfare and not self-aggrandisement. In the national arena, student politics was greatly influenced by progressive and Bengali nationalist ideologies.

Since the early nineties, campus life has been vitiated by violence and criminal activities perpetrated by a small number of students supposedly aligned to the major political parties that have ruled in turn since the return to democracy in 1991. Ironically, the reluctance of the democratic governments to hold student union elections in the last two decades has created the vacuum that has allowed criminal elements to hijack student politics and use it to enrich themselves illegally using violent stand-over tactics.

These hooligans are a tolerated and protected species as they constitute the muscle power of the major political parties. Regular elections of student councils might see the emergence of independent and better student leadership with good values, but authorities may not wish to take the risk of their side losing. Student politics can't be expected to be clean if the teachers are involved in destructive partisan politics and while academic appointments and promotions are influenced by party affiliations.

The degeneration of student politics in Bangladesh coincided with the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a New World Order (NWO) that, in the name of fighting terrorism, has used its military might to forcibly occupy Muslim-majority countries and take control of their natural resources. Using globalisation as a prop, and using the WB and IMF as its executive arm, the NWO has facilitated predatory and crony capitalism all over the world, causing unprecedented corruption and excessive greed, which have also become the mantra of the ruling circles of Bangladesh. Another casualty has been the decline of ideology and idealism, exacerbated by the mutilation of the 1972 Constitution and the Four State Principles. This has adversely affected student politics in Bangladesh.

Fortunately, young people continue to demonstrate glimpses of new hope. In spite of the revisionist history relentlessly propagated after 1975, the new generation demonstrated through their vote in the 2008 election that the spirit of the liberation war is still well and alive in

their hearts. In 2007, it was the principled and courageous stand of the general students at Dhaka University and elsewhere that convinced the army-backed CTG to beat a hasty retreat. In recent times, general students on many campuses spontaneously stood up for their rights and against hooliganism. It is heartening that in all these instances some smaller student parties, that had not abandoned their ideology and idealism, stood shoulder to shoulder with the general students, a good example of what student politics should be.

Enlightened students and youth have a moral obligation to fight for the right of young people to quality education and satisfying jobs, and for the social and economic rights of the toiling masses. They should be at the forefront to peacefully complete the revolution that was so rudely interrupted in 1975. An important weapon for this peaceful revolution is world-class and need-based education for all and at every level, as this is critical for the transformation of Bangladesh into a modern and internationally competitive country.

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young expatriate professionals, either permanently or for periodic visits.

Because of the prevailing confrontational politics, and faced with insecurity and daily hardship, many look up to the youth for succor and leadership. Starting with the language movement in 1948 and culminating in the final victory over the occupation forces in 1971, students played a leading role in each and every democratic, educational and anti-autocratic movement. Even after independence, students played a decisive role in toppling Ershad's military dictatorship. Seeing the corruption and dirty politics all around them most of the younger generation have become apathetic but, instead of shunning involvement, student life should continue to be the training ground for nurturing and developing new leadership in all spheres of national life.

Till the late eighties, through elected councils, students' gave expression to their extracurricular, cultural and sporting needs, without having to expend their youthful energy on antisocial activities. The most brilliant and socially conscious students were proud to be involved in student politics. When the need arose, they did not hesitate to get involved

Launch accidents: Why do they happen?

N. M. GOLAM ZAKARIA

RIVERINE Bangladesh is blessed with a vast waterways system, which is the cheapest mode of transport for carrying passengers and cargo. But we are doing nothing effective to prevent the frequent accidents that take place in the waterways. Al that we do after any launch accident is form an inquiry committee. The same thing has happened in the case of the recent accident when a passenger vessel, *MV Shariatpur-1*, sank at Char Kishori in Gazaria Upzilla of Munshiganj. The government has formed 3 inquiry committees, and they have been asked to submit their reports quickly.

Losing so many people every year in launch accidents is very rare anywhere in the world. It is very sad that we are not concerned about why such accidents are repeated in Bangladesh and how they can be prevented. As a result, launch accidents have become a regular phenomenon.

One of main reasons for launch accidents is the plying of unfit vessels in inland water routes. There are a large number of vessels plying which have not been built according to the approved designs. Owners sometimes freely change design parameters like the length and breadth, and even convert a one-storied ship to a multistoried one. In the case of a floating body like a ship, such modification must not be allowed unless they are supported by detailed technical analysis. So, you cannot expect a safe journey on a ship which itself is unsafe and, consequently, accidents might happen at any time, irrespective of weather condition, river route, oper-

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ating environment, etc.

The Department of Shipping (DOS) is responsible for inland water safety and the approval of designs of ships. The criteria they are following currently to approve the design are not up to the mark, and there is ample scope to improve the procedure, specially while giving approval for passenger launches. A passenger ship carries a large number of passengers, and it should adhere to the most stringent rules and regulations before getting approval. DOS is running the design approval section without experienced naval architects, supporting software and infrastructure to verify the design. Currently, there are 4 or 5 surveyors to survey as many as 10,000 vessels plying all over the country. Without ensuring enough technical staff, you cannot expect a safe water transport system.

There is no doubt that for the safety of waterways transportation, we need appropriate training of the personnel in the government organisations involved this sector. At the same time, for enhanc-

ing the technical skill of the personnel, we also need research work as well as testing facilities.

The performance of a ship is tested in a Towing Tank Facility. Using a model of the actual ship, the performance of the ship, its speed, fuel consumption etc. are tested under different wave, wind and current conditions, and the design is modified/optimised according to performance test results.

Using this facility, it could be possible to do fitness test of all inland vessels which are now plying and find remedial measures in case of any design fault. Thus, this testing facility will contribute towards enhancing overall safety aspect of inland ships. It will also help to support our promising export-oriented shipbuilding sector. The Department of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering has already taken steps towards establishing such a facility in the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, and necessary funding from the government on priority basis will definitely expedite the process.

We should not allow any more launch accidents to happen. It is high time to identify the problems behind such tragic accidents and address all the related issues. It is expected that the government will take immediate action through empowerment of concerned government organisations, and establish a testing facility so that such accidents do not take place in future.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Celebrating mediocrity



MILIA ALI

THESE days, I am vacationing in Dhaka. One of the great pleasures of coming back to one's roots is that one can reconnect with childhood friends and acquaintances. Interestingly, these friendship revivals provide an opportunity to appreciate the subtle differences between seasonal friends and those who

are always there for you!

Today's column is not, however, about friendship. It is a well-thought out response to a casual comment made by a friend whom I met after a considerable gap. He said, half in jest: "I like reading your columns, but wish you would sometimes write about us ordinary mortals!" My initial reaction was a defensive one. "What can I say about you guys that would make an interesting story?" I blurted out. No sooner had I uttered the words, I realised my mistake.

As a writer, it's crucial to receive feedback and, more importantly, to listen to the sentiments of the readers. On reflection, I could see his point. One tends to focus on the Steve Jobs' and Whitney Houstons since their charmed lives offer interesting fodder for a good write-up. But it's more challenging to write about the girl next door or just you and me! People, caught up in mundane chores like waking up each morning to head for jobs, struggling with office routine, and retreating home after

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a hard day to find solace and comfort with their families. In short, there is nothing glitzy about a mediocre existence. It's all so predictable, isn't it? Not the stuff that stories are made of! Yet, we, the ordinary people, constitute the majority of the world's population.

So, today's column is dedicated to us average folks. I realise that we are not all the same -- we have different needs and aspirations, and diverse lifestyles. It's also true that many of us do not possess the creative genius to leave our footprints on the earth. But there is a common thread running through the lives of ordinary individuals and the gifted and talented. We all love, we empathise, we are happy when we succeed and disappointed when we fail. Sometimes we are overcome with negative emotions like hatred, jealousy and anger, and we are capable of causing harm to our fellow beings. Bottom-line? Like the creative and outstanding we, the mediocre, are also humane and human.

Most of us may not reach the pinnacle of glory but we are the ones who appreciate great works of art. We sit in the audience for hours and listen to geniuses creating beautiful music. We read books that the lofty and inspired write and pronounce subjective assessments on their quality. We provide inspiration for creativity. In many ways we ordinary folks are indispensable. Without our adulation and critique, the extraordinary contributions of talented people would remain unnoticed and unappreciated.

Let's also admit that there is a strange comfort in anonymity. Sometimes it can be a blessing to be a part of the melting pot rather than a cherry tomato in a salad bowl! It provides us with a degree of privacy that shields us from the vulnerability experienced by celebrities. We are not required to play a role for the public eye. We are free to "be" who we really are.

However, once in a while we do experience those low moments. Moments when we wonder what it is like to possess extraordinary talent that can shake the world. What does it take to create a perfect piece of art or unearth a scientific discovery that can change the course of civilisation? We suffer pangs of longing for the attributes that guarantee outstanding ability. And, we go through introspection, seeking an answer to the enigmatic question: why were we not gifted with the talent of a Mozart or a Tagore?

Thankfully mediocrity also comes with a large dose of resilience. The average man does not break easily and is capable of accepting his mundane destiny! Despite our doubts and failings we are able to partake of the beautiful creations of those on the other side -- the masterminds beyond the boundaries of common reach. We can also emulate and implement many of the lessons they impart.

Yes, we may be immersed in mediocrity, but there are times when, like T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, we, too, wonder:

*"And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question."*

In all probability, we will never know!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.