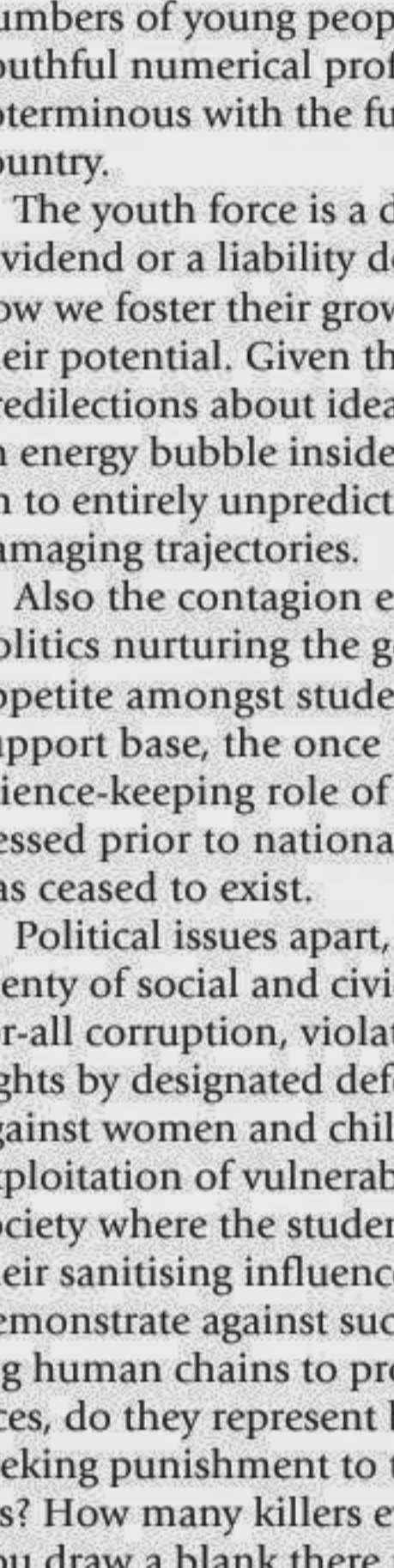


Youth, a number tag or a dividend?

Talk show experts and our education system

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM



THE burgeoning youth population constituting 40% of the population in the country is a badge of demographic distinction we wear, little realising that we indeed do so. Other countries with declining numbers of young people recognise our youthful numerical profile being coterminous with the future of the country.

The youth force is a demographic dividend or a liability depending upon how we foster their growth and utilise their potential. Given their romantic predilections about ideas, topped up by an energy bubble inside, they can move to entirely unpredictable, even self-damaging trajectories.

Also the contagion effect of national politics nurturing the get-rich-quick appetite amongst student leaders as a support base, the once fabled conscience-keeping role of students witnessed prior to national independence has ceased to exist.

Political issues apart, there has been plenty of social and civic issues like free-for-all corruption, violation of human rights by designated defenders, violence against women and children, ruthless exploitation of vulnerable segments of society where the students could wield their sanitising influence. Do they ever demonstrate against such evils, like forming human chains to protest errant practices, do they represent before authorities seeking punishment to the worst offenders? How many killers ever get punished? You draw a blank there mocking at rule

of law. The students' disconnect with their glorious legacies can perhaps be redeemed with continuous series of good elections held to the student unions of educational institutions across the board.

The list of examples of numbers being either exploited or abused can be endless. The first serial was staged with the admission tests to DU on the back of unprecedented pass rates at the higher secondary level. As the numbers of admission-seekers surged, it became a happy hunting ground for some unscrupulous insiders to mint money. Question papers were leaked through collusion between people who used to be above reproach in such a sacrosanct matter as defending academic integrity of the highest seat of learning. But as things stand "there is no den in the wide world to hide a rogue."

In another numbers game, goons were

exposed having leased out spaces along railway tracks for slums, deaths occurred in accidents involving some dwellers or squatting hawkers, raids carried out to vacate the premises with selective sheltering of influential elements and gradual reappearance of similar elements at the location was noticed.

The same game one sees being played out in 'tola' culture gone epidemic on the highways and in city streets. One marker of this devious practice is manifest in the high number of undocumented rickshaws (anything between 10 and 15 lac, whereas the licensed ones number only 70,000 or so) plying to choke the city whilst traffic policemen turn a blind eye. Then there is the lucrative sellout of pavement spaces to a large clientele of destitute, poor hawkers and squatter sale outlets.

No trifling matters these. Such is the sheer size of the entrenched interest groups and their beneficiaries that a daily booty of several lakh takas to a few crores is forked up with resistance building up into rock of Gibraltar against any change in the vitiating status quo.

The sayings of Napoleon Bonaparte contained the following one liner: "Contagion of crime is like that of a plague."

The bottom line is that it will take quality leadership with guaranteed stability in order to reap demographic dividends from the burgeoning number of youngsters or we fall by the wayside.

But like in rivers, in bad politics the "lightest things swim at the top." While exchanging Eid greetings with visiting dignitaries and distinguished citizens on Monday the prime minister kept to the same refrain: The BNP chief will have to pay the price for the political mistake she committed by boycotting January 5 general election. Khaleda Zia does not lament her decision publicly nor perhaps could she do so. But what if she had participated in the election with the caveat thrown in by Hasina? Most probably she would have come out in strength if not fully victorious. To that extent, the ruling party should lend a credit to Khaleda's non-participation in the polls.

Equally untenable is Khaleda Zia's insistence on waging a movement to topple the government which in effect means calling a series of hartals that people have no stomach for. They must shun the path of intimidation.

At the same time, all well-meaning people would urge the ruling party to engage the BNP in an interactive communication at some level from its position of strength to defuse tension and in order to sustain stability for all round well-being of the people under the benign watch of friendly countries.

MD. FAZLA MOHIUDDIN

WE have been witnessing a heated debate about the quality of our education system recently. This, as we all know, is not so surprising when we see that only two pupils qualified for admission into the English Department of Dhaka University. Although it is questionable as to whether the quality of education in our universities is up to the mark if we compare it with any respected international standard let us focus our attention on only primary, secondary and higher secondary level.

It is rather saddening to see the so-called 'experts' speaking in talk shows on "how an 8th grader can solve the admission test questions of Dhaka University" because of the sheer fact that it's not based on any informed research. I think this is where our talk shows have failed. These experts and talk shows certainly have good intentions but they are failing to create an serious and reliable debate because there cannot be any serious debate about the quality of our education system" without a comprehensive research based data.

We need to understand that a PhD in English does not automatically qualify a person to talk about "what is quality of education" or "what the best education method is." In a best-case scenario, we can count their opinions as personal but uninformed and over-exaggerated that will create only fear and will not help in any way to improve our education system. Having said this, it is worth noting that these people did have some excellent points about what is wrong with our current system, such as the over-emphasis on grades in public examinations; but we need more informed debates where right stakeholders such as education researchers and government officials should run the show.

To be honest, I personally believe the introduction of "creative system" and the attempt to debunk dependency on coaching centres and guidebooks are the hallmarks of this current education system. On the other hand, over-emphasis on grades, poor infrastructure and lack of quality teachers is where we desperately need to revamp. Moreover, it is a rather complex task to observe a child's growth from his/her childhood, and evaluating a child's merit or competence through just an exam is unjustifiable. Finally, in lieu of the current debates on education quality, I would like to mention some factual information which should shed some new light about the matter.

Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a highly respected educational assessment programme which has been organised by OECD since 2001 and which aims to assess the competencies of 15 year olds in reading, mathematics and science (see www.oecd.org/pisa). According to PISA publications, Finland is now considered a major international leader in education. According to PISA report, Finland has done remarkably well in all PISA assessments over the past decade and it performance is notable for its consistency across schools. In Finland, the gap between the top and bottom-achieving students is unusually modest. Within this system, children do not start school until they are seven, they rarely take exams or do homework before they are into their teens, and are not measured at all for the first six years of their education. According to OECD report, both regular class teacher (grades 1-6) and subject teachers (7-9) enjoy enormous degree of autonomy and the national core curriculum functions as more of a guideline where teachers are free to decide what they will teach and how. They select their own textbooks and other instructional materials and assessments in Finnish schools are a classroom responsibility. However, a significant focus in Finnish education is also to assist students to learn how to assess their own learning.

Finland is not among the high spending per pupil OECD countries, but nearly all of the money spent on education is focused on schools and classrooms. Teachers are given the same status as doctors and lawyers in Finland and prospective teaching candidates are required to go through a teacher preparation programme where they are expected to learn through research based dissertation, and there is a strong focus on developing pedagogical content knowledge. They also receive good training on diagnosing students with learning difficulties and are required to complete a clinical component as part of the programme.

The national evaluation council of Finland is focused more on the evaluation of national policies rather than the performance of the schools. There is a national matriculation exam (Like SSC) at the end of the upper secondary school but its role is to certify what the student knows and not to assess the quality of his or her school. Assessments are done at the classroom level with a lot of diagnostic or formative assessment data and individual problems are brought to light through programmes like meetings of pupil's care group. Education stakeholders in Finland maintain that market-based competition and choice with more standardised testing than students evidently require would not be good for schools, and the success of high stake testing policy is determined by whether it assists positively in students' learning, not whether it increases student scores on a particular test.

On a final note, I would like to suggest a scientific trial and error based learning in our schools where students would not be punished for failing a subject. In our current exam policy students are forced to wait for a full year to repeat an exam if they fail in one subject. Remember, failing in science is seen as opportunity to improve, and is thus accepted, not condemned. With new innovative initiatives, it should not be difficult for a country like Bangladesh to provide more customised service with the help of information technologies, and evaluating a student's progress will be more accurate if we invest more on developing digital evaluation technologies at classroom level and on developing the quality of our teachers.

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Is religious practice really non-productive?

M. AMINUL ISLAM AKANDA

Religious festivals create substantial demand for relational goods and services. The capitalist producers and businessmen acknowledge this to make profit from it. Traders in apparels, textiles and shoes in Bangladesh make a major part of their annual turnover during Eids and Pujas. Moreover, a substantial transaction takes place for sacrificing about six million animals during Eid-ul-Azha.

MINISTER Abdul Latif Siddique gave a capitalistic speech on the non-productivity of religious practices like holy Hajj and Tabligh Jamaat during his recent visit to an extreme capitalistic country. His remark has been extensively criticised and protested at home and abroad. It has also embarrassed the government because he is a minister. Secular politics does not allow such words about religious practices of any religion. It is not comparable to the words related to fundamentalism or terrorism often used in political language. The prime minister has rightly decided to expel him from the cabinet.

It was in the 19th century when sociologists assumed there would be a decline in religious activity with the expansion of a modern industrial society. If any decline offered more work hours, it would raise production of marketable goods and services. The economic status system of the World Bank in 1989 created a division among countries into low, lower-middle, upper-middle and high income countries. Many countries got the upper status for their higher per capita incomes but their religious practices have not disappeared. Why are rich countries becoming secular but not the poor ones? Professor Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan and Pippa Norris of the University of Harvard found an expanding gap between religious and secular societies in their research in 2004.

People perform religious activities in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and some other religions. Many social researchers have viewed religious practice as a productive process over the past few decades. It was identified as a determinant of one's ability to produce household commodities and religious human capital. In 1990, Professor Laurence Iannaccone of the Santa Clara University found that religious practice produced religious human capital, the inputs of which were the time spent in attending

churches and money contributions to churches and charitable works in Christianity. People whose time had high monetary value were engaged in more money-intensive forms of religious practice. Isn't it similar to the practices in other religions? The Muslim also invests time and money for holy Hajj, Tabligh Jamaat and other religious practices. Whatever is the intensity of participation, religious believers all over the world do the same to achieve human quality and social capital. Moreover, religious practices and festivals have a lot of economic implications, but they are not propagated.

Religious festivals create substantial demand for relational goods and services. The capitalist producers and businessmen acknowledge this to make profit from it. Traders in apparels, textiles and shoes in Bangladesh make a major part of their annual turnover during Eids and Pujas. Moreover, a substantial transaction takes place for sacrificing about six million animals during Eid-ul-Azha. These types of economic transactions take place in other Muslim countries, too. The economics of Christmas is also significant as it is typically a peak selling season in many nations over the world. Manufacturers of garments, footwear, accessories, home textiles, furnishing, toys, food products, grooming services, caterers, etc. do booming business during different religious festivals. Will they say anything against any extravagant expenditure on shopping or feasting?

Sometimes religious practices contribute to happiness as the believers often find happiness with little consumption. The New Economic Foundation has made an index for happy life, and Bangladesh was ranked 11th in the Happy Planet Index 2012. Like in other Muslim countries, rich people here perform the holy Hajj from their savings, which is not comparable to the spending on excursions. Contemporary development economists look for the activities with non-negative affects to others. Aren't the activities of Hajj and Tabligh Jamaat non-affecting or least-affecting? This sort of activity deserves to be welcomed in this

world of competitive and conformist consumption.

Religious institutions and practices also promote inter-personal, inter-family and inter-society trust, faith and responsibility. The economic interdependency in the poor countries is too weak to build economic trust and responsibility. However, the trust on banks is credible even in a society with weak institutions because of the high level of economic interdependency. The aged people in developed countries do not need to think about any trust deficits for their insurance coverage. Who will shelter the aged in a poor country if his family members don't take his responsibility? Religious festivals here are counted as a means of transactions of relational goods to establish interpersonal linkages. Because of high transaction costs in the legal system, people often find shelter in social justice. Theoretically, the believers in religion will not follow unethical means. However, there are abuses of religious faith and trust, which demand rectification. Can the religious practices be ignored because of that?

Secular politicians often speak against ill-motivated use of religious practices with words like fundamentalism or terrorism. However, Mr. Siddique's remark was not against any political rivals. It was his personal observation on the religiosity of people performing Hajj and Tabligh Jamaat. He shouldn't have expressed that in public. It is true that our Hajj pilgrims spend Tk. 40 billion but it very insignificant compared to the cost of corruption. Can we acknowledge that corrupt people are productive? They are anti-productive and have a negative impact on the economy. Our rank in public trust on politicians is 132 in the world with an index value of 1.9 out of 10. Won't it be rational to suggest that our politicians rectify themselves and pledge to facilitate production?

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QUOTABLE Quote

Do you want to know who you are? Don't ask. Act! Action will delineate and define you.

Thomas Jefferson

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Iron, for one
- Chimney cleaner
- Radiator part
- Midnight
- Chilled desserts
- Yeam
- Apple variety
- Apple variety
- Leafy lunches
- Great Leap Forward leader
- Makes flat
- Singer Patsy
- Sunburnt
- Laughed derisively
- Apple variety
- Apple variety
- Classic car
- Not at home
- Decreases
- Drummer Krupa
- Scout shelters
- Casino figure

DOWN

- Stylish
- Nuts
- Manipulative sort
- Ring carrier
- Proust hero
- George of "Cheers"
- Caribou's cousin
- Time for planning
- Pricing word
- Massenet opera
- Some monitors
- Leave out
- All there
- Worked the garden
- Balkans native
- Declare
- Castor's mother
- Mrs. Dithers
- Way back when
- Searches
- Toss out
- Fabric bundles
- Was in debt
- Touch down
- Salon jobs
- Ran into
- Pindar work
- Racket

Yesterday's answer

CRYPTOQUOTE 8-16

KY SKFKJU DE LWT ANOEJQ YO KJIEYN
GMWGXN YWO WSYEDG AN DWKQ GE
AN SKFKJU VVWTC. -N.N. IPYYKJUD

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: **I GUESS WE ALL LIKE TO BE RECOGNIZED NOT FOR ONE PIECE OF FIREWORKS, BUT FOR THE LEDGER OF OUR DAILY WORK.** -NEIL ARMSTRONG

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

AW, THAT'S SO NICE!
WHAT'S THAT?
THE TOOTH FAIRY LEFT ME A SYMPATHY NOTE

HENRY by Don Trachte

A XYDLBAAXR IS LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.