

Schools fail to make the grade

Holistic approach needed to plug lacunae

Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education survey, done by its Monitoring and Evaluation wing, paints quite the grim picture regarding the quality of education being provided in schools. Around half of all eighth graders lack competence in English with 46 percent lacking proficiency in mathematics. Worryingly, 45 percent of them even failed to gain satisfactory competence in Bangla. Without necessary proficiency in these fields, how can the nation builders of tomorrow succeed in overcoming their challenges? And how do we expect them to take the nation forward in a competitive global environment?

The report found sixth graders doing better, indicating a decrease in competence with age. Comparison between rural and urban students also revealed disparities with those in rural areas struggling against their urban counterparts. Girls too were found, disappointingly, to be lagging behind their male peers.

Educationists had previously protested flawed teaching systems, lack of skilled teachers, inadequate teaching and infrastructural facilities, and insufficient budget allocations, on numerous occasions. That the necessary attention to their concerns was not paid is evident by the survey findings. The fact that budgetary allocation to the education sector constituted only 1.8 percent of GDP in 2015-2016 is also disappointing, especially amidst the existing deficiencies.

Thus, in the interest of providing quality education to future leaders, the government should provide more support to the sector. Budgetary allocation should be increased to improve infrastructural facilities. Competency level of teachers should be improved through training and a holistic approach should be taken to improve the teaching system. Discrimination between male and female, urban and rural students must also be removed.

The peon who became a millionaire!

How could he get away with it?

THE story of how a member of the subordinate staff at Rajuk became the owner of property worth crores of taka published in this paper yesterday reveals the audacious manner in which a government employee has abused his position to amass illegal wealth.

In this particular case the errant staff member posed as a Rajuk high up, stole documents from different files, bought flats, shares, plots and even a shop at a commercial market owned by Rajuk. Some of these assets were bought in his wife's name. The wealth he has acquired could not be accounted for from any known source of income. The Anti Corruption Commission must be lauded for unearthing the crimes committed apparently under the noses of the errant peon's bosses.

We cannot help but wonder why the Rajuk authorities were not aware of such misdeeds before the ACC's probe.

The incident points out to a major lapse in monitoring the activities of employees in public institutions giving enough scope for corruption. Only a day before, a Bangla daily reported how an Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (UNO) allegedly took bribes from stone traders and kept the money in his wife's account.

While we appreciate the work of the ACC in trying to root out corruption in public bodies, we feel this is only the tip of the iceberg. All public institutions and departments of various ministries must make sincere efforts to stop corrupt practices that have spread like cancer, weakening these bodies and making them dysfunctional for the public. The government must realise that unless its institutions are free of corruption, the process of development will be irrevocably hampered.

35 YEARS OF CEDAW

State's responsibility in ending violence against women

MOYUKH MAHTAB

I saw a post on Facebook this week by a woman about how, while walking on the streets, she was subjected to repeated comments made about her physique by a man. It did not surprise me, and it would not surprise anyone, especially women who live in this country. This brave woman decided to confront the man, calling him out, and in no time a crowd gathered around her. While one man came forward to speak up in her defence, the rest gawked, some even going so far as to say that she should just forgive the man, "bhul hoye gese onar" (it's a mistake, let him go). What surprised me about this incident were the comments made on the post. That she was just an "attention seeker"; that the man who came to her aid would not have done so if the victim in question was a man (implying women are given undue privileges, and it is actually the men who suffer more); and the usual pontificating about the women's attire, even though what she was wearing on the occasion was mentioned nowhere. Social media, with its degree of separation and relative anonymity seems to encourage all sorts of remarks that we harbour. That a great many of us indeed think that women get undue privileges, that feminism is a bad thing, or that women who are subject to sexual harassment 'bring it upon themselves' through their behaviour or attire may go unnoticed in every day conversation, but the extent of this diseased mentality is evident to anyone who spends two minutes on social media. Violence against women is endemic, and per its definition, it includes both physical violence and sexual harassment.

As a signatory of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Bangladesh has made a promise to combat violence against woman as well as enact policy that favour women for that purpose. The brief explanatory text on the three principles that are the basis of the CEDAW states that for true gender-equality to be achieved, it is important for us "to closely look at seeming differences between men and women. More important is to see the underlying assumptions about those differences, which range from cultural norms to prejudices, mistaken beliefs and political structures." The convention also places the responsibility for change on the state. It recommends that States Parties "take special measures to

proactively address the persistent discrimination against women and thus allow women to exercise their rights, as guaranteed by national laws and policies, on an equal footing with men." It not only upholds the principle of gender equality, it calls for affirmative action to dismantle socio-political structures that perpetuate gender discrimination.

The CEDAW, instituted on September 3, 1981, is widely regarded as the women's bill of rights. It has been ratified by 189 countries. Bangladesh, one of the early signatories of the convention, ratified it in 1984. Simply put, Bangladesh is "legally bound to put its (CEDAW) provisions into practice."

It is expansive in its mandate, covering

culture of justifying this behaviour (in effect blaming the women for crimes committed against them), goes to show just how far we are from dealing with the issue.

General recommendation 19 of CEDAW states: "Traditional attitudes by which women are regarded as subordinate to men or as having stereotyped roles perpetuate widespread practices involving violence or coercion, such as family violence and abuse, forced marriage, dowry deaths, acid attacks and female circumcision. Such prejudices and practices may justify gender-based violence as a form of protection or control of women. The effect of such violence on the physical and mental integrity of women

victims were aged between 7-12 years. Between January to June, 101 women have been murdered by their husbands and 148 women have been harassed, 4 of whom committed suicide. And while there have been positive steps taken by the government such as the Domestic Violence Act in 2010, as pointed out by an article in *The Daily Star* on this day in 2012, we have a long way to go. Marital rape is not included in our definition of rape, educational institutions have not followed through with the 2009 HC order to set up complaint committees or complaint boxes for cases of sexual harassment, and our law enforcement and medical facilities remain completely gender insensitive. Case in point, the sheer psychological strain that a woman is put through in the process of filing a rape case, the clinical examination, and the court environment where her 'character' is frequently called into question in investigating the veracity of the rape claim.

Violence against women, be it physical or psychological, has been normalised in our society. What else would explain our victim blaming every time a woman is raped or sexually harassed on the streets? What explains the impunity by society to those who think it completely normal to touch a woman without her permission in broad day light? Why is the first question asked when a woman is raped, what she was wearing? How else can we explain our Shipping Minister's comment at the University of Dhaka, at an International Women's Day event, that the sexual harassment of women last year during Pohela Boishakh celebrations by men ganging up on them was an "inconsequential incident"? Or a Union Parishad member in Rangpur last month issued a *fatwa* on a woman to be caned, when the laws state that *fatwas* cannot be used to hand out punishments, physical or otherwise.

NGOs, educational institutions and the media doubtless have a major role to play to end discrimination against women. But as a signatory of CEDAW, 32 years into ratifying the convention, the state of Bangladesh must ask itself has it done enough? Because laws are as useful as their practice. This must start from the administration and its members' commitment at all levels if any dent is to be made on the hideousness of our collective mentality towards women.

According to Ain o Salish Kendra, from January to July this year, there have been 381 incidents of rape, and 94 of the



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

legal and social terrain to bring about effective change regarding gender discrimination. These range from those related to employment (maternity issues, workplace safety etc.) to those about cultural and social norms. And although the 1979 text of the CEDAW did not explicitly mention violence against women (VAW), through its recommendations, the convention has long since identified it as a major issue.

The World Conference on Human Rights recognised violence against women as a human rights violation, and its implications in the road to gender-equality are obvious. Since then VAW has been incorporated as a part of CEDAW and the general recommendations put forward by the convention covers this in detail. And the number of instances of violence against women in recent times, and our

is to deprive them the equal enjoyment, exercise and knowledge of human rights and fundamental freedoms. While this comment addresses mainly actual or threatened violence the underlying consequences of these forms of gender-based violence help to maintain women in subordinate roles and contribute to the low level of political participation and to their lower level of education, skills and work opportunities." It is clear that the state needs to take a stand not only in implementing laws that guarantee the equality of women and men (as does our constitution), but also take action in combating the patriarchal and sexist attitudes towards women that justify cases of violence against them.

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THE LOGISTICS EXCHANGE AGREEMENT

Turning a new leaf in Indo-US relations

SMRUTI S PATTANAIK

THE Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that was signed in Washington this week is considered a major shift in Indo-US relations. Negotiated for nearly twelve years this agreement is likely to enhance greater cooperation and boost India's defence preparedness, enhance the operational capacity of the Indian armed forces including their response to humanitarian crisis and disaster relief. The US has signed Logistic Support Agreement (LSA) with more than hundred countries in the world. However the agreement with India is unique as it gives the two countries the freedom to decide the extension of logistic service on a case to case basis given the sensitivity of India regarding a blanket permission that has been the case with US's agreement with other countries.

The negotiation for the LEMOA started in 2004. The long period of negotiation indicates the Indian cautiousness when it comes to extending logistics support to the US. India has been extremely guarded regarding its strategic autonomy and would not want to be seen as entering into any kind of partnership that will have strategic consequences for its penchant to follow an independent foreign policy. Successive governments have been careful about the strategic implications of such an agreement and its likely domestic political impact. Many have hailed this agreement as a logical progression in the upward movement in the Indo-US relations and argue that this agreement will Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation (BECA) are two other agreements that are yet to be concluded. However the signing of LEMOA in Washington and the visit of Secretary of State, John Kerry to participate in the second Strategic and Commercial Dialogue in New Delhi are equally significant for their strategic content and points to the emerging synergy in the bilateral relations. Indian External Affairs Minister in her inaugural remark in the Second Strategic and Commercial Dialogue emphasised that India's global role is of mutual interest to both and said "we look forward to continue working closely with the US to secure our membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and permanent membership of the UN Security Council". Therefore India is looking at the broader picture in terms of the global role that it aspires to play.

The Strategic Community in India is strongly wedded to the concept of strategic autonomy in India's foreign policy. However, signing of the LEMOA and various terms and condition enshrined in it only upholds India's emphasis on strategic autonomy. This means that India would retain its right to exercise its foreign policy independently without any alliance obligation. India

was quite cagey about any partnership that will compel it to take a particular foreign policy stance which may go against India's national interest and undermine its role in the larger international context. This is one of the reasons why India, after independence, was extremely careful about the impact that the cold war may have on its strategic priorities and abhorred defence alliance and placed priorities on indigenisation of defence production to reduce dependency.

In the post-cold war period and especially after the Indo-US rapprochement following the 1998 nuclear tests, India's relations with the US underwent a subtle change as India struggled to get out of its cold war strategic inhibitions. There were convergences between the two countries on various issues, mainly terrorism. As the US decided to dehyphenate its relations with India and Pakistan, and treated the two countries separately based on US foreign policy interest; India attempted to

exercises, pointing to a broader convergence in the maritime strategy. The DITI (Defence Technology and Trade Initiative) promises high end technology transfer to India including joint production enhancing the strategic value of US to India.

While the Congress termed the LEMOA as 'disastrous', the CPM termed it as 'anti-national and dangerous' for India's sovereignty and foreign policy and cautioned that India would lose the much preserved strategic autonomy. The Janata Dal (United) argued that the Agreement entails an alliance with the US and goes against the grain of India's independent foreign policy which now stands compromised. The argument of the political opposition in India is that the agreement allows the US uninhibited access to India's military bases without any corresponding advantage to India. However, analyses of LEMOA suggest that both India and US will have refuelling and resupply facilities, and this is confined to military logistics. It does not provide military bases or permanent hosting of troops and fighter jets for either party. The extension of these facilities would be decided on a case to case basis, and the two countries can deny these facilities if one of them feels that the base is used to wage war against a friendly country.

The Ministry of Defence of India has put to rest any speculation regarding the implications of LEMOA. In a statement, the ministry said any cooperative effort between the two as per the agreement will be decided on a case to case basis and the agreement does not create any obligation. The LEMOA, according to the agreement will be confined to "logistic Support, Supplies, and Services [which] include food, water, billeting, transportation, petroleum, oils, lubricants, clothing, communication services, medical services, storage services, training services, spare parts and components, repair and maintenance services, calibration services, and port services".

India, whose cumulative sea dependence is 93 percent, is wary of securing the sea lane of communication. Though the Indian Navy has expanded its out of area operation over a period of time, the constraint of operating without refuelling and replenishment facilities would force India to ink strategic partnership with countries with whom its interests converge. In spite of apprehension and the jealousy with which India has protected its strategic autonomy; it is unlikely that the LEMOA will impinge on India's strategic choices, especially at a time when India is self-confident of its economic and strategic potential and is keen to play a global role. Moreover zero sum games are no more the fundamental rule in international politics post-cold war; the states are motivated by positive sum games that will provide win-win situations.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Find a safe corner during an earthquake

On August 24, 2016 afternoon, I was at my office when all of a sudden, the whole building started shaking. Soon after sensing the tremor, panic gripped the workers and most of them rushed to the stairs.

We need to understand that rushing for safety in a congested city like Dhaka could result in serious accidents like a stampede. As earthquake is occurring frequently in our country, we should develop our preparedness in this regard and it would be better, if we choose a safe corner of the building during an earthquake instead of rushing to the stairs.

Md Zonaid Emran
SEO, Treasury Dept., FBL

An appeal to the government

We humbly request the concerned authorities to reconsider the decision of relocating shops, restaurants, educational institutions and other business entities at Dhanmondi, Gulshan and other areas. Numerous people will be affected by this decision financially. For the sake of their families, please let these businesses, organisations and institutions continue to operate. And from now on, please do not allow people to open business in residential areas.

R. Kabir
On e-mail