

HSC results—sliding pass rate

Cure the real causes

WHILE the pass rate is not necessarily the only index of the level of knowledge of the students and the standard of education at secondary and higher secondary levels, it is admittedly a very important indicator of the quality of the pupils that go through these exams. It is worrying that the success rate in the HSC exams has seen a downward trend over the last two years. This year's has been the worst in the last eleven. But there are both positives and negatives in this year's results. While the number of colleges with hundred percent pass have decreased, it is encouraging that the number of colleges with hundred percent failure has decreased too. Unfortunately, the gap between the rural and the urban colleges has not decreased. Also discouraging is the fact the number of students in science is declining.

One of the reasons of comparatively poor performance is that the dangerous trend of question leakage that had become almost epidemic, was stymied fully, and the credit must go to all those involved in the system. Strict marking of scripts is also a reason for the fewer number of examinees qualifying this year. However, what is of worry is the increase in the number of failures in English as well as Physics and ICT.

Because we are entering the digital age at a very fast pace, there is no alternative for the future generation than to acquire proficiency in ICT. And given that English is one of the few international lingua franca, which is virtually our second language, the overall standard of English generally attained by the students at this level is rather disheartening.

While we congratulate the successful students and commiserate with the unsuccessful ones, we would call upon the government to remove the problems in order to provide the best education. Getting good teachers in English and Physics should be given top priority, so must be the urban colleges that do not normally attract good teachers.

Pillows for prison inmates

An overdue attitudinal change

IT is astonishing that it took 230 years for our jail authorities to introduce cotton-pillows for prison inmates. That speaks volume about how dangerously punitive our prison system is. If it takes more than two hundred years for our authorities to provide such a basic necessity in the jail code formulated by the colonialist, how many more years do we have to wait for a humane prison system—which is prerequisite to transforming prisons into correctional facilities?

Prison cells do not always host just nefarious criminals. And, even the most dangerous inmate has a right to have some basic provisions that our jails clearly lack.

In many countries in the world, prison cells are seen as correctional or rehabilitation facilities. Other philosophies about prisons have been proven ineffective or even counterproductive. Only countries like Norway and Sweden that run prison systems in a humane way have been able to maintain a low recidivism rate. Therefore, our ethos and attitudes, regarding why people should be imprisoned, need to change radically.

While introducing pillows for inmates for the first time is a trivial gesture, it represents a change in mindset. So does the newly built central jail in Keraniganj, which was opened in 2016, replacing the overcrowded old one in Nazimuddin Road. Our endeavour should be to make prison cells less punitive and more correctional.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is ridesharing a solution to congestion?

The number of ridesharing companies in Dhaka is increasing and we can see how our narrow roads are getting flooded with motorcycles carrying passengers who would otherwise have to wait long hours to find a transport. Young people in particular are now using their motorcycles to earn additional income working with ridesharing companies.

However, there are some disadvantages with ridesharing. And, no matter how popular the service is, we cannot rely on them to be a long-term solution to our traffic congestion problems. The government should invest heavily in affordable quality public buses for a long-term solution to that.

Some relief from congestion could also be expected once the much-touted expressway and metro rail projects are completed.

Shafkat Rahman, By e-mail

Mobile gardens

The story of Tapan Bhowmik, an auto-rickshaw driver, published by *The Daily Star* was good to read. While his "mobile garden" may contribute little to saving the environment, it does carry a symbolic value at a time when we are destroying our environment on a daily basis.

He showed how willingness and love for nature can make a change. And, we should replicate his idea and concept as per our own capacities.

Md Zillur Rahaman, By e-mail

Solution lies in local gas, not imported LNG



BADRUL IMAM

BA NGLADESH enters a new era of energy use as it starts importing liquified natural gas (LNG) beginning in July in order to solve the prevailing gas crisis. Already a floating LNG terminal is in place in the sea off the Moheshkhal island with first the load of LNG from Qatar. At this initial stage about 500 mmcf (million cubic feet per day) of gas will be provided which comprises 18 percent of the total gas supplied in the national grid. The LNG input will be increased to 1,000 mmcf by early next year. As per the Power Sector Master Plan (PSMP) 2016, the government projects to increase the LNG input to about 40 percent of total gas supply by the year 2025 increasing it further to 50 percent by 2030 and 70 percent by 2040.

LNG is a comparatively environment friendly fuel which is available abundantly in the international market. However, it is an expensive fuel and its uses are seen very widely in developed economies like Japan, Korea etc. where little indigenous primary energy is available. For Bangladesh, a short term limited LNG import to meet the ongoing acute energy crisis may seem justified, but the rationale of large scale LNG import on a very long-term basis is questionable. The latter will make the nation widely dependent on expensive LNG and this will have negative impact on the economy. According to geoscientists, Bangladesh is a gas prospective area and there is significant amount of "yet to discover" gas lying untapped due to a lack of exploration.

How expensive is LNG and how would it affect the gas price structures in Bangladesh? According to Petrobangla, the national gas combinedly supplied by foreign oil companies (60 percent of total supply) and by national oil companies (40 percent of total supply) has an average price of Tk 5.32 per cubic metre gas. On the other hand, the LNG procured from international market has a price of Tk 33.44 per cubic metre gas. Petrobangla would mix the national gas and LNG (gas) and the mixed gas is set to have a price of Tk 12.89 per cubic meter (Public hearing, 24 June 2018, Energy Regulatory Commission). That means, due to addition of LNG in the national gas supply system the price of gas is set to increase more than two-fold.

The price of gas will increase further for the following reason. Petrobangla calculates the gas price as above on the basis of LNG price of USD 8.50 per MCF in the international market. But this price is not fixed and it fluctuates according to the price of oil. The oil price has been on the rise again and therefore, as Petrobangla calculates, if the LNG price reaches USD 10 per MCF, then the price of LNG mixed gas in our gas supply system will be increased to Tk 15 per cubic metre.

There is a further issue that will drive the gas price even higher. For calculating the price of mixed gas as above, the ratio of national gas to imported LNG is taken as 2,700 mmcf to 1,000 mmcf or 2.7 to 1. The quantity of LNG import will increase significantly in future and therefore the ratio of LNG will also increase in mixed gas, thus, pushing the mixed gas price higher. In simple terms, more the LNG portion in the mixed gas, higher will be the gas price. In one independent study it has been shown that the LNG import will

initially cost Bangladesh about USD 2.7 billion per year (Padma bridge is being constructed for USD 3.5 billion).

The notion that natural gas resources of Bangladesh is on its way to depletion is based on wrong concepts and misinformation. The known gas reserves may well be depleting in near future but enough gas lie underground untapped as believed by petroleum geologist. Bangladesh is one of the least explored area in the world and its true potentials have not been unearthed.

Historical data (from pre-Pakistan period) show that the rate of exploration drilling in this country had been one well drilled per year or even less which is considered anything but serious by any standard. Yet the result of exploration was remarkably good in the sense that significant reserves have been discovered in the eastern part of the country. It is strongly believed that a serious gas exploration drive would certainly find significant new reserves in the largest delta basin of the world. The following points lend support to this belief:

i) Exploration activities in this country are essentially limited to simple and easy targets. These are anticlinal structures very commonly found in the eastern part of the country and house almost all gas fields discovered so far.



But there are equally common prospects occurring in the delta basin known as "stratigraphic prospects". These are more difficult to find and drill. Bangladesh exploration programme historically take a backseat in venturing into more difficult prospects and a very large part of the land in the country remains unexplored.

ii) The Chittagong hill tract area has a series of anticline structures, recognised as good prospects, but exploration drillings have been minimum because of hilly terrains requiring robust logistics. Bapex, the national gas exploration company, has for a long time, been trying to form joint venture with foreign company to explore the area, but could never come up with a right partner.

iii) Bangladesh offshore, a prospective gas province, has 26 shallow and deep exploration blocks. Only 4 blocks have IOCs exploring under PSC, while 22 blocks sit idle—a statistics pointing out the lack of serious drive for offshore gas exploration. It remains a puzzle as to why Petrobangla's offshore multiclient survey

programme initiated after the maritime boundary dispute was settled with Myanmar in 2012, was lost out of sight.

iv) It is wrong to keep the cheap locally found gas untapped and bring in expensive LNG. A very large gas field (shahbazzpur) in Bhola island, for example, has not been duly developed even 20 years after its discovery. A new gas field, Bhola north, also remains untapped. Another large gas field named Chattak in Sylhet area was unlawfully given to a dubious foreign company Niko, only to be blown up and destroyed.

v) The gas wells operated by foreign oil companies have higher rate of gas production per well than the ones operated by national companies. It is a matter of technology and management applied to the gas wells that make the difference. Application of the more robust technology and management by the national oil companies could easily enhance the production rate in the national wells thus making extra gas available from the existing gas fields.

vi) Unconventional prospects, geologically known as thin bds, synclinal, high pressure to name a few are promising prospects around the world. Some of these prospects open up new frontier for gas exploration in

neighbouring Tripura. Similar unconventional prospects are present in Bangladesh and need to be drill tested for gas.

vii) A good number of exploration wells in the past were declared dry and abandoned without complete and conclusive tests, although tell-tale signs of gas were indicated (*The Daily Star*, June 1). These wells should be re-drilled for complete tests.

It is not logical to raise a slogan on exhaustion of gas resources in Bangladesh, while exploration status for gas remains poor and incomplete. It seems that the policymakers tend to believe otherwise, since they appear more interested in LNG import rather than exploring Bangladesh's own gas. The negative impact of large scale and long-term import of expensive LNG on the economy will be inevitable and the question remains if this factor has been taken into consideration.

Dr Badrul Imam, Professor of Geology and energy analyst.

Skilled workforce is RMG's future



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

IT is well-known that the minimum wage of Bangladesh's garment workers is one of the lowest in the world, but what is less well-known and discussed far less often, is that the productivity of the sector is also the lowest among apparel producing nations, largely due to the fact that Bangladeshi workers lag behind other nations in skills and suffer from a lack of skill development opportunities and facilities.

Since its foundation, the booming Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector has, traditionally, been regarded by foreign buyers as a value resource, based on high

higher profit margin that, in turn, can be used to develop more upscale RMG facilities and can be used for improvements in the general well-being, standard of living and training of garment workers.

It is fair to say that the clear majority of product being produced by the Bangladesh RMG sector falls under the heading of commodity items—items that are considered basic by international buyers and, therefore, are the most subject to purchase price pressure, especially given the tough retail environment in Europe and the US (our key export destinations).

Admittedly, the volume of orders placed on these items is high, but profit margins are low, and we must consider how long we can continue to service this level of business, at a time of rising labour, raw material and resource costs (gas, electricity and water). Bangladesh



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

had been a renowned destination for low-cost labour resource for many years, but the world map is changing, with emerging resources in Africa and Cambodia (for example) that can compete with Bangladesh in terms of labour cost and are receiving funding from both local and international governments and companies. It is time to question the established business model and, if we are going to embark on a mission to upgrade the product we produce as a nation, we need to address how we improve the skill set of our garments workers and increase the sector's productivity level.

The investment in innovation in the production process is one issue to be addressed. But it is the training and development of the RMG sector workers that I wish to highlight; to quote Steve Jobs, Co-founder

of Apple, "Technology is nothing. What's important is that you have a faith in people, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they'll do wonderful things with them." Tools in this context are not limited to the latest machinery available, but include the development of our workforce's skill sets, so that they are competent and able to produce higher grade product.

Historically our workers enter factories as trainees, at the lowest pay grade and are trained in situ at the workplace, depriving them of the opportunity to earn higher salaries and breeding a culture whereby knowledge and training are gained through a trial and error basis. Is it not time that, when hiring new workers, we not only consider a candidate's skill set and prior experience (which will largely be minimal!) but also what they can bring to the team in IQ, emotional intelligence and loyalty to the company?

This approach requires a shift in the thought process and behaviour of factory owners and their managers as it is crucial to develop lasting and meaningful relationships with the workers, to listen to them and get to understand what motivates them and their concerns and to learn what they have in mind for their own professional growth and development. This approach will not only strengthen management's relationship with the workers but will instil loyalty to the company. By allowing the talents of the workers to be developed in a considered manner, it will encourage them to attain greater levels of expertise and, eventually, become more valuable to the business as a whole.

The key to the development of any successful business is the development of a team spirit that enables all members to contribute to the best of their abilities. This is an approach that we need to adopt and nurture for the continuing success of the RMG sector.

The training of workers is not only a matter for factory owners and managers. The RMG sector contributes some 83 percent to our nation's GDP, and so is an invaluable factor in the continuing development of the country. The existing system of training facilities for garment workers provided by the government is meagre considering the value of the industry as a whole. I believe that the government and other stakeholders should make concerted efforts to invest in, and establish, much-needed networks of training facilities offering trainees the opportunity to gain the necessary skill sets and training in their chosen garment profession, without having to undergo the "trial-and-error" approach currently being practiced.

A trained workforce, with honed skill sets, will allow our industry to compete at higher market levels and, coupled with investment in technology and innovation, greatly improve overall industry efficiency.

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