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Students And Campus

The popular complaint about falling standards of education seems to have taken on the proportions of a serious concern about education itself, particularly higher education. In our part of the world the concept of higher education relates specifically to university education. Judging by the daily erosion of campus peace and the prospect of finding effective answers increasingly receding the popular reaction is intelligibly one of decpening despair. True, by the sheer familiarity and frequency of incidents occurring on the campuses this feeling will in time lose its keenness and society come to terms with them; i.e, if it has not already.

Recent clashes on the Dhaka University campus however have restirred public anxiety, but it is not as articulate as it had been, say, a year ago. Nevertheless, neither the habitual lack of sensitivity, nor the absence of remedies can alter the fact that university education so affected at its most crucial stage of the academic session (the pre-summer-vacation one), an almost regular annual feature, is a calamity both for students and society in general.

As a sequel to the recent incidents Dhaka University, according to first reports, was going to be closed sine die. The syndicate resolution on closure was however, changed later and the extreme step would be taken if the situation showed no signs of improvement. Any fresh trouble may therefore lead to closure. Mymensingh Agricultural University has already been closed for an indefinite period following trouble on its campus. Rajshahi University has just reopened after two months of Ramadan vacation, (a vacation term not easy to understand), only to be closed again for the next Eid holidays, if not earlier for usual reasons of unrest. Vacations, regular or forced, plus student or teacher strikes account for an average annual loss of more than a half of the working days (120 days in the year). In one of the most troubled academic years in the past only 40 days of work were on record for Dhaka University. That examinations are shifted and carried over from one session to another to be completed with the publication of results etc. is common knowledge.

All this is at the cost of hundreds of students, and poor guardians who represent almost 70% per cent of those whose wards are prosecuting their studies at the country's universities. That it turns out to be a grievous loss also to the state, seems to trouble nobody.

But it is time it did— at least the students. At university age they are, we believe, capable of fully assessing their loss and again both in immediate and ultimate terms. And our comments in this leader (after more than one in the past) are addressed specifically to them. This precise direction of our views has been necessitated by the fact that our pleadings with university authorities, the administration and political deaders to help find a permanent answer to this problem have failed. This could have been a reason as much for us (in common with those doing little to discharge their responsibilities) to wring our hands and look away. After all it is those young boys that pay for their own wrongs; what does it matter to us. That is normally the cynicism any self-centric society tends to develop in such situations. Pleas with students to drop politics, or political parties to take their hands off students (particulry university ones) have not worked, and are not likely to for sometime yet, although that might be the most pragmatic remedy one could think of.

Yet there could be a difference with which students will do politics. For instance, students in South Korea led the recent demonstrations against Chun, the authoritarian ruler. But South Korea has the highest rate of education in Asia, and is among the highest in higher education. Which shows politics and students can go together but with a difference, i.e. politics not destroying studies, or a student's career or intellectual development not being prejudiced by it.

By South Korean standards, for instance, our University student feuds are far too localised, and the issues too narrow, centering mostly on party of personal matters. These can exist without ever breaking through the surface, or erupting into bombs and guns. In fact what they fight with the guns for are too small for such weapons, and can be settled in a sitting between the leaders of two or more given parties. So the need is to lay down the guns and arrange to live together with all differences of ideology and party affiliation. This is something of course for our political leaders to advise students to do. Since they do not do so for reasons known to them—and better known to others it is time students taught themselves to do it.

This is a must to create that sort of climate in which you can grow in knowledge and vitality. Nowhere in the world students are ruining themselves by infighting as our students are doing. This has to change. And the change can be- and ought to be launched and worked out by the students themselves, their leaders.

A new anxiety has taken hold of the imagination of the students, university authorities and governments of most developed countries. This is how to face up to what they visualise as the brain-based future for man. Times are changing so fast that much of what has so far been achieved educationally will have to be updated at top speed to cope with such a future. The laggards will thus be put at a real disadvantage even among the advanced societies. Hence the prospect of a far keener contest for them not only to catch up with each other; but to outstrip. For the prize is for the bravest. With such vistas of intellectual progress opening up before the world how can we afford to destabilise or destroy the little that we have. And certainly the competition in one in which universities and their alumni will have to play the most significant role. Potentially our university youths are capable of almost as much as their counterparts anywhere. Time, therefore, for all concerned to rise to the new challenge posed by this expanding horizon of knowledge and curiosity calling for extraordinary efforts on the part of those running education systems and institutions every-

where. Are we at all doing the minimum to prepare for

such a future?