

16 December, 1986

Bangladesh Times supplement

126

Our bedevilled examination system

A.M. Harun ar Rashid

IN ONE of his books, Bertrand Russel tells us the story of his finding one day at his school "a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated but he replied, "The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that's fair!" "These words epitomise the human condition in Bangladesh almost in every walk of life, but perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in our public examination halls. In the schools, colleges and universities of Bangladesh, the idea of holding a fair examination above reproach seems to have been given up.

Adoption of unfair means has now become such a wide-spread practice, especially during the last two years, that it does not any longer evoke any comment even from the vocal community of our Neelkhet scholars and Mission Road journalists. On the one hand there is the hydra-headed monster of corruption of every imaginable form in our examination halls and on the other hand, there is the naked rat-race for the purchase of examination results at any price. In this "the bigs" are now having a field day in Bangladesh.

Political philosophers talk about "social contract" as the bond which has brought human beings out of the jungles, out of the "state of Nature." Looking at our examination system, one cannot have any doubt that the social contract is working exactly in the opposite direction—we are rapidly and inexorably taking a plunge towards our pristine "state of Nature". No examination system anywhere on earth can work unless there is a social contract to obey its dictates and abide by its rules. Unfortunately by common consent

we seem to have decided to turn a blind eye to institutionalised corruption so much so that we no longer seem to care for the inviolable sanctity of our examination system.

It was therefore with great hopes that the nation looked forward to the recommendations of the Examination Reforms Committee set up by the Government of Bangladesh on October 3, 1985. The Committee under the very wise and able chairmanship of Professor Shamsul Haque, ex-Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, took six months to examine the examination systems not only of Bangladesh but also of neighbouring countries and some of the advanced countries like Japan. It took great pains to elicit public opinion on this vital issue affecting the life of every single individual of the country and therefore the unanimous recommendations of the Committee not only reflect the opinions of its members but also of a large cross-section of our educated people. The recommendations of the Committee submitted to the appropriate authority on April 30, 1986, have not yet been materialised. It has been said that the examinations are only a part of the education system and since the education system is itself rotten, there is no point in trying to salvage a part of the mouth-eaten structure which will crumble in any case. So why bother? But bother we must, not for this generation which is vile but for those unborn generations who will once again lift the country out of the mud. The mud and filth called the education system has been bequeathed to us by the British empire-builders who

SEE PAGE III

Contd. from page 1

wanted a body of clerks to help pheristically called "law and order" and our education system has been doing nothing else since that day. Lord Macaulay was clear in his mind that "it is impossible for us to educate every body" and we seem to have decided to extend this dictum by saying that "it is impossible for us to educate any-body!"

Once upon a time the idea was "to create a class of people who would be Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, opinion, ethics and intelligence". And the Bhadrak class thus created has evolved and perpetuated a system which has an infinite capacity for breeding corruption. The system is so vulnerable to misuse that a few years back even the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University was dismissed for having leaked out question papers to one of his relatives!

Examination has been traditionally a very serious affair in the subcontinent because of its importance in getting a job. Nowadays there is of course a thin veneer of respectability sought to be imparted by a desire for "higher studies" but the basic urge still remains the hunt for jobs. Even then, there is no basic difference of opinion about the goals of the examination system which must be:

- (i) to test the acquired knowledge of the students and their ability to apply,
- (ii) to help development of character, and
- (iii) to provide incentive for higher education leading to a creative life.

Unfortunately none of these goals is achieved by our present examination system. At present the Secondary School Certificate examinations and the Higher Secondary Certificate examinations are conducted by four Boards at Dhaka, Rajshahi, Comilla and Jessore and during the last thirtyfour years the number of candidates has increased in these two examinations from 27,235 and 8,291 to 4,01,247 and 1,94,873 respectively. Clearly this staggering increase has given rise to all kinds of administrative problems some of which are the following:

- (i) about 600 examination centres have been set up in towns, villages and sometimes even in the remotest areas,
- (ii) these examination centres have very often been set up under political pressure without any cogent educational criteria,
- (iii) there is an enormous variation in the number of candidates appearing from these centres with certain centres being extremely "popular",
- (iv) it is openly claimed that some centres provide requisite "facilities and opportunities" to the candidates,
- (v) the guardians & even the teachers have no respect for the sanctity of the examination system in general

Examination system

and (vi) above all, the students themselves are by and large completely indifferent to all questions of morality, decency and civilized behaviour.

There are various reasons for the erosion of civilized values but systematic disenfranchisement of the people is probably the most important of them all. To quote Russel again, "a government is usually called 'democratic' if a fairly large percentage of the population has a share of political power".

In this context it is somewhat ridiculous to talk about reforms of the examination system. Even then the Examination Reforms Committee placed the following suggestions before the Government for consideration:

1. Nature of the examination
- (a) Internal and external examinations.

The Committee did not think that the present examination system could be reformed retaining the external examination system intact. There must be an element of internal assessment and both should be assigned definite roles to play for the overall development of the system. In the present circumstance, the Committee was of the opinion that the proportion between external and internal examinations should be as follows: External 80 per

cent, internal 20 per cent.

- (b) Final results

It was suggested that the certificate should contain the internal, external and combined results separately together with the percentile rank of the candidate. The results of the internal examinations should be finalised by an examination committee and all such results must be sent to the Boards who should have the right to supervise these examinations whenever necessary.

- (c) Evaluation of Internal Records.

Since one or two tests do not usually give a true indication of a student's abilities, it was suggested that the internal assessment should be a continuous affair especially during the last two years in the school. An Examination Research Council was proposed by the Committee to help the schools in conducting modern internal tests which really judge the aptitude of the pupils.

(d) Scholarship Examination. In principle, separate scholarship examinations should be held to select students for higher studies in the universities but in view of the fact that this would entail a huge financial expenditure without any concomitant gain, the Committee could not recommend such a separate scholarship examination.

- (2) Paper-setting

See page 6

Examination system

FROM PAGE III

The present question-papers which are set for both S.S.C and H.S.C. examinations are mainly stereotyped and based on writing essays. This has been identified as the main defect not only by this Committee but by all previous committees and commissions. It was, therefore, recommended that there should be a homogeneous blend of essay-type, objective and short-answer questions as in the table.

Subjects	Essay type	Objective & Short Answer
Language and Literature	50%	50%
Others	40%	60%

- (i) various sets of papers should be prepared of the same difficulty level,
- (ii) different sets of question papers may be used in the same examination hall,
- (iii) an expert committee must oversee the question papers,
- (iv) all questions must be pre-tested and standardised,

- (v) no question should be repeated in examinations of successive years and
- (vi) there should be a question-bank.

2. Evaluation of Answer Papers

- (i) Evaluation must be on the basis of marks which may be subsequently converted into grades,
- (ii) this conversion should be on the percentile basis,
- (iii) a candidate must pass in all papers separately, but if he or she fails in an examination due to shortage of marks in one subject, he or she may be allowed to appear next year in that subject only.

- (iv) there should be a system of re-examination of answer paper only in that subject in which a candidate has secured less than 30 per cent of his average marks.

It will be seen from these recommendations that none of these is revolutionary and the financial outlay required for their implementation would not have been very great. The primary requirement for any reform is the presence of a will.