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Secondary Education—And Examination

A report from Brahmanbaria a couple of weeks ago said the degree examinees in a certain examination centre turned the invigilators out of the examination hall, closed the doors from inside and wrote their answers to the questions with the greatest ease. This synchronised with the decision announced by the Education Minister at the two-day national conference of the BCS General Education Association held in Dhaka that a positive step had been under way to stop practices like examination rigging. It was the introduction of objective types of question for SSC examinees to the extent of 60% of the questions, 40% of them would be answered in the traditional way.

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The idea and the step may have the look of a radical change in the system of examination, but the attraction ends there. Only objective types of question covering by far the largest portion of a given course of study will be of little use either to the individual student or to education as a whole. To begin with, particularly at the Secondary, pre-Secondary or post-Secondary stage, study-courses are so planned, (or have to be so planned) as to develop the creative potential of a student demonstrated by his ability to not only comprehend his subject but also to answer questions set on it 'in his own words' and style. This is the universally accepted purpose behind the academic grooming of a teen-ager from the primary to beyond the secondary level of education. The demand that this system of study and assessment makes on a student is two-fold: one, he must acquire at least a working ability to express his own thoughts on a given subject or aspects of it, taught in the class, in a vocabulary of his own together with a coherent organisation of his thoughts. And about sixty per cent, if not more, of a given course of study have to be so dealt with both by the teacher and the student, the former grooming him in the technique of writing independent answers and the latter progressively picking it up. The process practically starts and ought to start, from the tests and tutorials conducted in the classroom, maturing at the point where students will have prepared to sit for a final public test.

The objective type of questions will simply defeat this purpose. At a minimum the damage done by it will be to mechanise the very attitude of a student as much to his subjects of study as to the examination he will take. The worst effect will be on his creative ability so much as to make him end up an intellectual or academic cripple. Such types of questions designed simply to test the comprehension efficiency of a learner would apply harmlessly only to a few subjects of simple memory interest such as current affairs, elementary geography, elementary calculation and similar ones—mostly to under-fives.

To make adults or near-adults do so will be reducing them to infants. Abuses in an examination are rather the end-result to the general decline in the standard of teaching or academic discipline, lax attendance in classes, teachers negligence and students getting away almost with any excess they commit.

Where we have got our educational planning and management seriously wrong is that the authorities seem to have a rather cavalier attitude to the importance of secondary education to the overall development strategy; logically following on it is the indifference with which abuses in the system, pinpointed either by the national press or coming to light of themselves, have been treated over the two decades or so. This also explains not only the decline in quality education generally but also the erosion of quality in higher education (including university).

The stage from primary through secondary education is the foundation on which the progress, prosperity of a modern state vitally depends. Its exact proportion to the progress of a country is illustrated most significantly, in Asia, by Japan.

It runs a school programme so rigorous that, according to a recent report, it has become a cause for thousands of students to commit suicide annually. The Japanese boy must make the grade, or he is done for. Japan owed its national progress in the 60s and 70s to a work-force so educated.

As regards education planning and policy it is still left with executives rather than academics. Bureaucratic control of education is largely responsible for the continuing slide. We have an institution called IER (Institute of Education and Research) staffed by well-trained personnel. Some of them are men of ideas, experience and expertise. The Ministry of Education could with great advantage make use of this resource both through official liaison maintained with it and reemployment of its outstanding retired teachers in the education planning department, among other means of spotting where the rot is and who could help remedy it and how.