

Separating Education From Politics

Perhaps all is not as well with our world as we keep claiming. President Justice Shahabuddin has asked for separating students from political parties. What he said will make very useful national sense if it is no casual comment suiting a special ceremonial occasion but a serious matter of conviction. We say this from our experience of disillusion about very nice things said times without number with few or no follow-ups in action. That is because actions speak louder than words and, as Dr Johnson said, an ounce of action is better than tons of words.

They are important for two critical reasons, shedding light as they do on two big negatives: one relates to education and the other to politics. Both botched as never before, or as nowhere else in the developing or developed parts of the world. Education now is a subject very seriously discussed as a problem even in the most advanced parts of the developed world itself. But the most interesting thing about it all is that education is nowhere so massive a casualty of politics as in Bangladesh.

Result: a desolation which governments have for long presided over. They have done so with no self-questioning as to the factors producing the desolation. Students, emotional susceptibilities came in handy for exploitation by emotional politics. And that exactly is what is going on in much of the third world transition to democracy. Only long familiarity and habit have made and kept both not only not reprehensible but increasingly attractive among us. This has to change. You can't, nationally, conceive of a greater tragedy than this.

But anything unpleasant feels so only if you think about it. Once you can develop that blissful habit of easing up on everything, life is a cheering going.

The centuries-old truism is that education is the foundation on which to build or rebuild a nation. Even countries like the UK and USA with their education record already relatively so high by world standards are giving serious renewed attention to the recently created problems for their lower and middle stage education, which is vital to development of national human resources. In contrast, we seem to have busied ourselves with the task of bending them (human resources) to politics, and party politics at that. The President's demand that students be separated from political parties and allowed to devote to their studies points at this. Will those for whom it is meant please listen?

Students in some developing societies get drawn into politics in any big national shake-up, for instance, for this country, a revolution like the liberation war. But liberation once achieved should not mean re-deployment of students to promote party strength, and, worse, inter-party violence and all that this might lead to in society. Political re-stabilisation and economic reconstruction can be and should have been the only sensible next task for the nation having won the independence war. Has this happened or made to happen yet on the scale it should have? Who will answer these important questions?

The South African leader Mr Mandela has been recently among us. For our leaders, Presidents and Prime Ministers, such are the models to follow and familiarise. Here is a man who has reknit a politically shattered country. In contrast, we are doing perhaps the reverse, stimulating political hate and rivalry, dividing rather than unifying and integrating. Bangladesh's leadership, at all levels, it is time, must address this task as the nation's top priority. Not merely as a ceremonial ritual but as part of a seriously followed (national) politico-social goal—and policy.

22 APR 1997

THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER