

Education In Bangladesh

—Jamal Arshad

THERE is undoubtedly a correlation between social instability and student unrest, between political uncertainties and declining standards in education, between corruption in general and academic anarchy, but it is possible to exaggerate the connection.

Academic institutions have been known to function as isolated islands, helping to restore sanity to the social scene, and there have been instances of sudden outbursts of unrest among the young in the midst of stable political and social conditions. The wave of student unrest which swept Europe and America in the sixties had little to do with any political process: it subsided as suddenly as it had appeared; and students in the West are said today to be more conservative than their elders, more concerned with their future careers and prospects than with organising demonstrations and rallies in support of this or that movement.

What characterises student unrest in Bangladesh is that it seems to have come to stay as a permanent feature of academic life, with no cures visible. It has reached a point where a student who enters a high school or a college or a university has learnt to place participation in political work at the top of his priorities. Attendance or examinations are all subordinated to the aim of being able to take part in some movement in which he believes, and we have also noticed a tendency among adults to measure their achievements collectively not in terms of how they helped to advance the frontiers of knowledge but in terms of what contribution they made to the success of a social or political movement or cause. This reflects an interesting change in society's standards of value, which inevitably influences the young. It also points to a gradual abdication of adult responsibilities in favour of youth; it is the young who are left to decide what is good for the country or society. This represents a major reversal of roles which cannot but have a profound impact on what happens on campuses.

The other interesting thing worth recording is that while almost everybody deplors unrest in the abstract, no one would condemn any particular manifestation of it. On the contrary when there is a strike or stoppage at any institution the blame is laid at the door of somebody other than students even in cases where the truth is self-evident. Students are widely recognised as a force to reckon with. People fear to criticise them even in the most general terms. Criticism of students in general and resented by them, although they might be at loggerheads among themselves on many issues. There is a consciousness that students are a collectivity with a distinct outlook and a distinct set of values, which is believed to be beyond reproach.

It is also customary to ascribe unrest to the educational system itself. The system is said to be a colonial legacy, not suited to a free society, but interestingly no one has come forward to define a system which

would be free from the defects which are believed to characterise the existing one. A change of text-books is no change of a system; nor has anyone suggested that the duration of secondary education should be reduced from five years to three or the duration of the degree course from two years to one. The syllabuses taught today do not bear the remotest resemblance to anything which was in vogue fifty years ago. Nevertheless the complaint continues that unless we remould the entire structure of education nothing good will follow. In saying this little account is taken of the fact that all the great figures who have dominated the history of the subcontinent during the past two hundred years, statesmen, writers, scientists, have been the product of the system that we condemn today. If it were as bad as it is said to be it could not possibly have given birth to so many outstanding men.

Not only the outstanding figures, but all the senior civil servants who manned the administration and whose efficiency no one doubted, the members of the legal profession who played such a prominent part in the subcontinent's struggle for freedom—they too have been the product of the same system. It is only when the system began to break down owing to factors which had little to do with the system itself that a marked deterioration in standards set in.

I am not saying that the so called colonial system must be preserved intact, but we must guard against cheap formulas which do not give us the truth about the reasons why standards have declined. One of the things which have practically twisted the original system out of shape is the strain imposed on it by a tremendous increase in the number of students since the middle of the nineteenth century, when Western education was first introduced, without a corresponding increase in the size of teaching staff or a corresponding expansion of material facilities. I am not using the word tremendous to imply that education has spread to all levels, but compared to the very small number of pupils that the first schools, colleges and universities had to handle, the number today has reached a colossal figure. The ratio of teachers to pupils has continued to decline. Today it is said to be 1:55 on an average in Bangladesh: for primary education; 1:29 for secondary and 1:16 for universities. These are averages, and I think the actual figures for individual schools, colleges and universities must be lower. That should be an indication of the kind of care that an average student receives. There are many institutions where literally students are left to fend for themselves as best they can.

Any experienced person will agree that no matter how we tinker with systems, the ultimate success or failure of a method of education is determined by the quality of teachers on the one hand and the quality of text-books on the other. In neither respect has any progress been made.

We have a text-book board for secondary schools but they seem to think that their main duty is to patronise local writers, have all text-books locally written, without any check on quality. Every year the same farce is enacted of inviting publishers to submit manuscripts for approval within three to four months of the date of notification, and every year a new set of books is adopted. The idea is perhaps to spread the board's patronage as widely as possible and give every publisher and every writer a chance to make some money. It is the poor pupil who suffers as a result, having to read books hastily prepared and hastily printed. Irrespective of the subject, I have not seen a single text-book free from defects and errors. Text-books for Bengali usually consist of the compositions of local writers, many of whom have no standing in the literary world. Of course this is nationalism, but at what cost? A locally manufactured brand of English is being taught again on the excuse that local writers must be encouraged. Books on history and geography are equally defective.

Apart from questions of policy in regard to Bengali and English, it will be appreciated that no writer and no publisher could possibly put on the market a good text-book in just three months. In the USA, I know, a publisher takes a minimum of three years to produce a book. The whole process is divided into stages, ranging from choice of material to writing, editing, and illustration; the printer comes in last, not would any printer expect that a hastily printed book full of printing errors would have any chance of being accepted.

Publishing is a big business. We have nearly 9 million pupils in primary schools, about 2.5 million in secondary and about 4 hundred thousand in colleges and universities. The adoption of a single text-book for the primary stage can turn the fortunes of a publisher. The profits at the secondary level are slightly lower, but they are considerable. It is impossible to avoid the painful conclusion that profit is the only motive which seems to guide the choice of publishers and writers; the young people for whom this material is intended and who represent a captive market do not count at all.

Now that, because of the switch-over from English to Bengali as the medium of higher education, the same thing is happening in the universities, academics who can sense the potential of the market are coming forward to translate standard text-books hastily or to compose notes which give their charges what they need for immediate consumption for examinations. There is again no check on quality, so that the academic scene is dominated today at the highest level by utterly inferior products which students have to accept.

Training Teachers

The question of quality receives so little emphasis that we have begun to think that a quantitative increase in the number of schools, colleges and

universities will automatically bring about an improvement in the standard of education. There is no adequate provision for the training of teachers. The country has about 51 institutes for the training of primary school teachers and 10 for secondary education, but none at all for colleges. It is assumed that as soon as a student acquires a Master's degree he masters the art of teaching pupils, so that even when an adequate number of scholars are found to staff a college, they are invariably raw graduates or MA's who in addition to the deficiencies in their general education, have to surmount the difficulty of communicating to the young what little they have learnt. The situation is not very different in the universities. Lax standards in the recruitment of staff are paralleled by their lack of professional experience of training as teachers. What the college or university teacher learns about methods of education is from the rough and tumble of his association with senior teachers, but this not enough. We have about 11 thousand college teachers, and about 2,705 university teachers. More than fifty per cent of them may be found to lack adequate qualifications, and their positions to patronage.

Moreover by accepting the right of every school leaver, irrespective of his record, to enter a college or university, we are filling the higher institutions with students who lack the aptitude for higher education. They treat a college or university as a place which confers certain privileges on them, privileges which have no relation to education as such. They feel more attracted towards extra-curricular activities than towards study or the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. It is unfortunately students of this type who predominate today and give the entire student community a bad name.

I do not deny that seven universities and about 350 degree colleges are not enough for a population of 100 million. But it must be realised that the establishment of more colleges and universities by itself will solve no problem unless we can find the right kind of staff and unless we make a distinction between secondary and higher education. We know that lack of employment opportunities drives large numbers of school leavers to colleges. But what we are doing instead of creating more employment is to ruin the colleges we have by overloading them with young people who are not really interested in higher education and also tempting shrewd enterprisers to convert colleges into money making businesses. Academics are being called upon to tackle problems which are not academic, and no body can now be sure of receiving a good education if he wants it.

I have said all this only to impress on all that the deterioration in education will not be checked by the creation of more schools and colleges and universities unless we have a clear picture in our minds of what we want and unless we cease confusing ends and means.