

Officer ... 03 MAY 1996

The State Of Education

What happened at the Dhaka University senate meeting on Monday is fundamentally a reflection of the state of education in the country. That state, one might add, has not been of a very positive kind, owing to the various shadows that have fallen upon the whole area of education. If it were merely a question of pointing out, or at, one particular problem which ails higher education in the country, one would feel relieved in thoughts of a solution being stumbled upon. The sadness is in the very real knowledge that a multiplicity of factors has consistently been there to raise questions in the public mind about the future of the young. The senators who spoke, and spoke out, at the senate meeting made it pretty clear that in a number of instances higher education in Bangladesh is hostage to the failure of university administrations to set their houses in order. Matters of a very serious nature have come up; and unless they are accorded the attention that is only to be expected, one can be certain that the whole business of enlightening the young will fall flat. Who among us, at a time when the national desire is for a life of decency and civility, would want that?

We at this newspaper have spoken at other times of the numerous problems that hamper the pursuit of higher education. And among the subjects we have repeatedly raised was the responsibility of teachers, the quality of students and the influence of shadowy personalities and ideas on the campus. We believe that the subjects we have all along talked about (and other people in other places have done the same) remain to be dealt with on a reasonably secure basis. Take the question of session jams. There was time in the recent past when it was expected that the universities would soon be in a position to emerge clear of the problem. But it now appears, owing to the trends and directions politics has taken in recent times, that the spectre of session jams is back with vigour, if not vengeance. It is this that arouses our deepest concern. And it is so because we have known only too well how messy education has become in the past many years owing to reasons of politics. One need not go into a recapitulation of all that story. But one surely needs to stress the thought that the time is here for a decisive and fresh beginning. Simply stated, education needs to be rescued from politics as it is pursued on a national scale. But let the point be clearly understood: that politics or the holding of political opinion is the right of all citizens has never been in question. But what complicates things is the fact that too often the influence of political negativism has marred the essence of education in Bangladesh. And not just among students. The teaching community has on its own been prey to politicisation of a kind that has quite affected the overall, time-honoured spirit of teaching. That has contributed in large measure to the falling standards in higher education. And, of course, the way in which student politics has followed its diverse courses over the past many years has by itself been reflective of the qualitative decline which has set in, the decline being in the standards universities are generally expected to maintain. Once one brings into the issue the immense influence of national politics on education, one understands the baneful effects it all has on the future of the country.

The plain truth is that the damage that has been inflicted on the academic fabric of the country will take years to be wiped off. Yes, every year thousands of young men and women step out of the universities, giving everyone the palpable feeling that new strength has been added to the army of the educated. But in real terms, how much of academic achievement is proved by mere numbers? It will not do to gloss over the fact that over the past two decades, and more, there has been a clear and clean fall in the standard of academic achievement. Worse, there has been a drastic fall in the quality of teaching. Obviously, these are matters that cannot be sorted out in a hurry. But a beginning needs to be made. And how is that to be done? To go back to basics, the universities and their authorities must on their own go for self-appraisal. The DU senate meeting was told of the many allegations of corruption levelled against important people in the academic region. These must be investigated. If teachers do not hold in their hands the ability to purge themselves of the ills they have been suffering from across the years, they cannot expect to guide the people who will lead society in Bangladesh in the years ahead.

And then will come thoughts of overall rethinking where education, its present state and future prospects are concerned. The political dynamism of a nation rests, in the ultimate analysis, on how strongly and firmly grounded the intellectual abilities of its young are. The young, once they cross the threshold of youth, will be expected to lead. Shall we prepare our young for that awesome responsibility?