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The Teacher And The Preacher

The teacher and the preacher—do they rhyme? They did sometime, but do no longer.

When the teacher snoozes and the preacher fumbles societies like ours tend to tumble. It may not look like doing so. An embellished facade can for a time hide the decay that sets in inwardly.

'Societies like ours' is an important qualification: Those in their sixties or seventies or a little younger can recall the days when in what is now Bangladesh teachers and preachers performed a complementary role. They were not however conscious of the gratuitous contribution they were making towards building up society, or keeping it, also unconsciously, from falling apart, visibly or invisibly. In fact they were too busy about their assigned duties to be. They formed part of a tradition or history that suffered little or no split under any serious social upheaval for a pretty long time, from under British rule well into the earlier years of Pakistan.

But from the late 50s or so the back-to-back shake-ups (politically generated) started reacting on the two nation-building institutions, the teacher at school and the preacher at his job across the countryside. (Urban expansion and concentration is a relatively later phenomenon).

This tradition or history is a long-entrenched oriental one accounting for a continuing pattern of juvenile behaviour both at home and school, reflected in the level of stability society enjoyed. It was a time when hardly, if ever, any seminar was held for academics, social or political leaders to discuss questions of youth discipline, declining values, crime control, drug addiction or similar issues.

It was not necessary, because the spade-work necessary on these counts was being done effectively almost as a matter of routine in the schools with the teacher not only teaching the subjects assigned to him but seeing to it that his pupils behaved, learnt certain rules of conduct and practised them. Breaches as a rule brought down on them even physical punishment much as neglect of prescribed academic duties did. Across, in the vast open spaces around the villages, mass gatherings addressed by the preacher were regular weekly or monthly features. The influence these gatherings exercised on the audiences was not confined to the theological know-how. This led to a kind of mutually stimulating rapport established between preacher and listener, and the moral impact so generated penetrated rural society in such a way as to make anti-social activities of the kind that is now proliferating universally abhorrent.

All this seems now a thing of the past. Instead, newspapers, even books and discussions share one common complaint that society is decaying. And the pessimism is no part of the common rhetoric of doom but is based on fact. Things like academic discipline or regard for law and rule, or self-or-social resistance to crime or criminal behaviour are as good as gone. To mend things or bring society into line public as well as private dependence seems to be solely on the government and the police. But neither, acting single-handed, can do anything about it. And it has not. With near-disastrous consequences.

The public (official) failure stems from the failure at the roots—at the level of the teacher and the preacher, for a start. Society has fallen into decay because, first, the schools have; second, those who could help hold it together by contact and communication, the set of (professional and non-professional) public preachers, are not only numerically inadequate. The few that exist are not as active along the line their forbears were, or as they ought to be or could be made to be, either by their own sense of obligation to society or by a policy of using their services to its uplift. 85% of the country once thriving morally and culturally under their influence is now relatively desolate.

A subject of great potential to sociologists and a problem capable also of being administratively tackled it is certainly not beyond the scope of the one or the capacity of the other. What is needed is the will backed by a little imagination. At the pragmatic official level there is an infrastructure in place: the Ministry of Education and also the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

What we have said should not look like wool-gathering once the problem of social decay is sought to be seen in its correct perspective.