

Politics-Free Campus

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IT is gratifying to note that the country's Prime Minister is willing to put an end to student politics at campuses provided the main opposition BNP and other parties agree to go for the move. Deputy Leader of the Opposition Prof AQM Badrud- doza Chowdhury stressed the need for eliminating terrorism rather than stopping student politics. "It's more important today to make the student politics transparent, clean and free of vengeance" he said, while speaking in parliament on Thursday (30 Apr 98). He however, did not explain how. Other politicians and/or patrons have not said anything significant about it as yet. It would be difficult, and is likely to take time to have politics-free campuses. Yet it is a good sign that people have started talking about it.

Much has been said and written about student politics in Bangladesh. President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has been vocal on the issue and favours banning student politics on the campus. The President accused the political godfathers of (BO 26 Oct '97) enticing youths, students in particular, into evil deeds like terrorism and killing. "A large segment of the country's youth community, particularly, college- university students, are dabbling in active politics and terrorism," he noted with deep anguish. "Armed with firearms they are capturing halls, killing their rivals by shooting or bombing and being rewarded by their respective godfathers on submission of report of these misdeeds. All kinds of wrong-doings are now taking place in educational institutions, barring studies. If such situation continues in educational institutions, the future of the nation will be murky. Not civil society could support these evil deeds. It's the responsibility of us all, specially the political parties, to bring these deviated youth back to the right track," the President said. But his words are not law of the land and one appears to be keen to oblige him. Politics, politicians and students are inseparable in Bangladesh. I think we have to live with it for many more years in future. A time may come when students themselves will raise voice against it and come forward to bring about a change. Therefore, ask not how student politics can be removed from our education arena, ask what student politics itself can do about it. Student politics has to be eliminated by the students for the students.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina went to the United States (1996) to give a talk at Harvard's Fairbank Center for East Asian Research. The Prime Minister was eloquent, as any other visiting foreign dignitary would be, in praising Harvard — one of the

eight Ivy League (top ranking) universities in the United States. "Harvard has been, and will always be known for many things: learning, research, excellence, discoveries, values, great achievements and laudable leadership. However, from a distance and at the receiving end of what Harvard could give to the rest of the world, I believe one word best captures the essence of Harvard: vision," she said. When her attention was drawn to a sharply contrasted atmosphere prevailing in the academic arena back in Bangladesh as to whether her government has any plan to suspend campus politics as proposed by President Shahabuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister replied in the negative. "Student politics is not the problem, the problem is terror on campus. We have to make concerted effort to combat campus terrorism in Bangladesh," Sheikh Hasina suggested (writes Syed Badiuzzaman from Boston — Holiday, July 4, 1997). But many Bangladeshis living in and outside the country have reservations about this view of the Prime Minister. They would rather believe that it is student politics that lies at the root of campus terror in Bangladesh, and hold the politicians squarely responsible for dragging students into politics.

Disgusted by the conduct the politicians, some who are more explicit on this issue say that they turn the students into front-line party workers and use them in a highly irresponsible manner to advance selfish political agenda. Narrating their personal experiences, they say that the self-seeking politicians care about neither the future of the students nor the conditions of the poor parents making tremendous sacrifices for the higher education of their sons and daughters. These people say the politicians, on the contrary, do care about the future and well-being of their own offsprings. They send their children overseas to keep them at a safe distance from the dirt and danger of politics and have them equipped with the most advanced education and knowledge. Even the offsprings of their close friends and relatives stay far away from the periphery of politics giving rise to questions about the fairness of the politicians.

An important mission of politicians is to build and educate the nation, as education is the backbone of a country. Education, indeed, is also the yardstick of civilization and key to all-round development. Then why don't the politicians help restore a normal academic atmosphere at colleges and universities across

Bangladesh by keeping politics out of the campus? Why do they turn the educational institutions — where peace and calm should always reign for learning and research — into a hotbed of politics instead?

Student Politics in Bangladesh

There is no denying the fact that student politics played a vital role in Bangladesh. About 45 years ago, the students set a shining example by coming out of their classrooms to defend the honour of our mother tongue. Once again, they demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and patriotism by taking the centre stage of politics in late '60s and early '70s when our existence as a nation faced a critical challenge. The students have already won an honourable and permanent place in history of Bangladesh. Now all they need to do is to preserve it. They were not used by politicians and political parties at that time. They came out spontaneously and the entire nation (Bangalees) joined them.

Clearly, the historical background that brought students into politics has changed. Today, we have an independent and sovereign country. We enjoy a considerable degree of freedom; so does the press of the country. The military rule has come to an end, making way for a democratic system.

So, it's time for the students to concentrate on their academic pursuits without any outside interference in order to materialise the long-cherished dream of independent Bangladesh. Without education a country cannot develop. The development of education has a direct bearing on the socio-economic development of a country.

The nation needs good doctors, engineers, educators and other professionals without wasting any more time. So, the students should make best use of the prime time of their lives to fulfil the need of the nation. Good education is also essential for becoming good politicians. The campus should not be represented by the student wings of different political parties in the best interest of politics. The student union — a legitimate body elected by the general students, is enough to take up various issues confronting the students.

Let me take the term education and try to explain what it actually means. So far no clear cut single definition of education is available. Literacy is not education. It is a means to education. One may term 'knowledge' as education. A carpenter who makes a chair, may be a masterpiece, a workshop boy at

'Dholakhal' who can repair photocopying machine and perform other technical useful jobs for you but cannot write their names are all illiterate. But they are productive. Whereas a person who has passed school, college and university obtaining various diplomas and degrees, may remain unproductive, yet we call him 'educated' but who is in fact a burden on society. No matter how education is defined, there is no substitute for it.

The basic principle of education means learning how to read and write for communication and understanding which is similar everywhere all over the world. We call it primary education and it is an essential part of all education systems everywhere. In fact, it is the foundation of an education system. We do not have good primary education system in the country.

Why Education

We say education is the backbone of a country's development. If it is meant for development, 'our' education should be 'production-oriented' generating employment. Traditional formal education has a gestation period say 16 to 30 years. We cannot afford that kind of time to make our education productive. We have been hearing for long that our education system is defective. But very little has so far been done to make it efficient and effective. Education policy and systems, should therefore vary from country to country depending on its socio-economic backgrounds and needs. Our education policy and system should be designed to suit our needs so that it can develop our socio-economic conditions based on our backgrounds and needs, making it productive right from the start. To do that, alongside primary education, we need an 'incentive-oriented system' generating employment and earning. I think informal vocational/technical education with employment, formal primary and secondary education, side by side may go a long way in this respect.

Let university education be selective and free from politics. Vocational and technical education and training for the vast majority may prove to be more beneficial and fruitful for the country. Will our politics and politicians allow an education policy incorporating provisions for making our education 'production-oriented' and free from politics? Ultimately, students will have to come forward with "politics of the students by the students for the students" to remove politics from our education arena, for the greater interest of the country.