

Scope for cost saving in education considerable

THE opportunities for cost savings are considerable in education. A recent study for the "World Conference on Education for All" concluded that a feasible package of reforms could reduce the recurrent costs of education systems by 25 per cent. The package consists of, among other things, measures to reduce repetition, more efficient use of community resources, multiple shifts, selective increases in class size and some introduction of cost recovery at the tertiary level. But the quality of education should not be sacrificed to obtain savings in unit costs.

Just \$15 per pupil is the annual cost of a non-governmental primary education system in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) provides a three-year functionally oriented curriculum, preparing children for the fourth year of the official primary education system. Village leaders and parents are actively involved, and very simple classrooms are being used. The teachers are not fully trained. But the schools are highly successful and have increased access for the children of poor families — particularly for the girls, who make up 63% of the pupils. Of course, the actual costs are greater than the money spent because of contributions "in kind" from parents and the

rest of the local community. Increasing the size of classes is another way of reducing costs. Achievement tests show no significant difference between children in classes of 25 and those in classes of 40.

Schools can also increase the number of pupils per teacher by operating double shifts in the same classrooms — one group of pupils gets schooling in the morning, another in the afternoon. Double shifts save on teachers (if they take both shifts) and on the capital costs of buildings, equipment, libraries and laboratories. With this system, Senegal has cut costs considerably and increased access to education (box 4.1). Zambia has also double (and even triple) shifts to reduce capital costs in education by almost a half — and it also reduced the current cost per primary

school student by an average of 4.1% between 1980 and 1984.

Multiple shifts have disadvantages as well. They put greater pressure on teachers — and on parents, who have to look after small children who are not at school. But multiple shifts do offer considerable scope for unit cost reduction.

The private sector is one route to greater efficiency in education. Comparisons between private and public schools are difficult to make because the different schools usually draw students from different backgrounds, and this is likely to have an influence on their performance. Even so, a study has shown that in the Philippines, private secondary schools send, on average, about half as much per student as public schools — and the students achieve better results in both English and Tagalog (the national language of the

Philippines), while public school pupils do better in mathematics. Studies on Colombia, Tanzania and Thailand also suggest that, at the secondary level, private schools are more cost-effective than public schools.

Research, based on evidence from several Asian countries, indicates that unit costs in higher education tend to decrease when the share of the costs financed through private contributions increases. Beyond recovery of 40%, however, the marginal decrease in unit costs becomes very small. There is evidence that schools whose financing and planning are managed in a decentralised way, and which one supervised by local committees, are more efficient than those that are part of a centralised system.

Source : Human Development Report, 1991 : UNDP

Caring For The 'New Illiterates'

IN the beginning there was illiteracy. Over the centuries and thanks to God, light gradually dawned, until today we have compulsory primary education. Most people, including many teachers, would agree that the acquisition of literacy still, or rather the ability to read, marks a frontier so clearly defined that it divides humanity into two totally divided groups.

On one side of the divided is the myriads of the unfortunate. People who are unable to penetrate the mysteries of the printed word and remain on the outside for all the world as if they were standing on the shore of a sea across which they could be borne to marvelous lands, if only they had a ship to sail in. On the other side are the legions of the privileged, who have had the good fortune to achieve, that blessed state in which they know for certain that c and o make co, that c and a make ca and, thanks to this knowledge, can decipher the posters which proclaim the magic words: "Coca Cola"

Yet I must confess to harboring serious doubts about the authentic city of this rigorous division of humanity into literates and illiterates and, in particular, about using it as a yard stick with which to evaluate people.

Not knowing how to read and write is natural: all of us come into the world that way. No one was born educated. I mean by this that man in the natural state, at birth, is illiterate; but insofar as he is able to learn to read, he is also potentially literate.

For various reasons which I will not go into here, society decides to turn this potential into reality. In other words, to transform man's innate capacity to understand letters and signs into mastery of the art of reading. This is achieved by means of a complex process which begins with a primer and ends goodness knows where. At the end of these efforts, referred to as primary education, the subject is proudly declared to be literate, a person of superior distinction — which he undoubtedly is

So far, so good. But the ability to read is in itself only a potential state. To know how to read is one thing, but actually to read is another. If the newly-literate person does not exercise his reading skills, what is the point of learning to read at all?

We now come to the next stage in this analysis of the true value of literacy. Let us assume that the potential reader takes the next step and actually becomes a reader. Does this mean we can say that the objectives of literacy have been attained? By no means, because at this stage a new scenario unfolds. The illiterate person has become literate, the literate person has become a reader, and the reader is reading. But what and how does that person read?

The same question arises again. Every reader is potentially a good reader. But will he or will he not become one? If the answer is yes, we can say that the aim of literacy has been achieved: the ability to read well, in such a way that the word becomes spirit and tests come to life.

It is clear that the objective of literacy is rarely fully at-

tained. We must recognize the existence of those whom I call the neo-illiterates. These are people who, although freed from the hell of total illiteracy, have not yet attained the empyrean of reading, but hover in a limbo somewhere in between.

I am not referring to those who cannot read because of a lack of books or libraries. This kind of practical problem is relatively easy to solve... I am thinking rather of those who can read but do not do so, for more profound and complex reasons than the fact that they do not have a book at hand.

I would suggest that two types of illiterates should be recognized.

First, there are the "pure", classic, natural illiterates who for some reason do not know how to read. Such people may be tragic insofar as they have the potential to achieve excellence but lack the mental stimulus to realize their potential, which remains dormant for lack of knowledge and culture. I feel respect, sympathy and admiration for this category of illiterates. In my country, you only need to stroll a while in the hills of Castile or in the olive groves of Andalusia to come across illiterate people who, when you get to know them, prove to be as humane, as dignified in their behaviour and as wise in their judgement as many people whose heads are stuffed with learning.

The other type of illiterate person might be described as impure, counterfeit, the product of modern education and, unwittingly, the embodiment of its faults. Those who know how to read, but nevertheless to all intents and purposes remain illiterate, I call the neo-illiterate.

This type of "neo-illiterate" may be total or partial. Total neo-illiterates are those who, after learning to read at school, choose not to use their reading skills except when they actually have to read a letter, scan a cinema or theater programme, or consult the telephone directory. Some of them may glance at the sports pages, thereby enjoying a form of journalism which is particularly meritorious since for many people it provides the only occasion when they read....

Many of these people are active, practical and — to borrow a fashion-able modern term which associates the mysteries of Greek with those of engineering — dynamic....

There is also a species of partial neo-illiterates whose members may be seen hovering round newspaper kiosks like bees buzzing round magnificent flowers, in search of ingredients with which to make the honey of their intellectual lives. They never read books but they are fascinated by the proliferation of magazines and the topics they cover. They deserve sympathy because far from sparing their efforts as readers, they are prodigal with them. They read voraciously, poor things, returning home laden with magazines which they plough through for hours on end, without getting much more out of them than a child playing with a jigsaw puzzle that he never manages to finish, never seeing the overall picture in which everything falls into its rightful place....

This kind of reader arouses our compassion. The more he

reads, the further he drifts in this boundless sea of print, the level of which rises a few meters every week. The reader of a book knows where his task begins and ends; he can relax, take a holiday. A magazine reader, especially if he is a subscriber, feels pursued as if by the Furies by these terrible, bi-weekly or monthly creatures. If he flags, he will drown in a rising tide of newsprint. To keep abreast of the material that pours from the presses, the reader must make a titanic effort. A hundred writers penning articles for a score of magazines snap at his heels like a pack of tireless hounds which allow their quarry no respite....

Several conclusions can be drawn from this necessarily incomplete portrait gallery of neo-illiteracy. Firstly, it should never be forgotten that the word "read" is ambiguous and so, consequently, are such expressions as "learn to read" and "know how to read". These are complex expressions which should not be taken in their most literal, superficial sense as simply describing the capacity to understand the most obvious meaning of the written word. There is no doubt that the possession of this simple technique wrests man from his natural illiteracy and opens up vast perspectives. But if this aptitude for expanding the potential of the soul, for spiritual fulfilment, is not used, he will find himself in a situation which sounds paradoxical yet is nonetheless very real — that of an illiterate who knows how to read. He has been wrested from pure illiteracy, yet through disuse or neglect of the faculty of reading a regressive mechanism begins to operate which, sooner or later, will take him back to his point of departure, or worse-spiritual illiteracy....

truth, statistics and social convention uphold the fiction that such people should be counted as literate, and that they belong to the privileged group of those who know how to read. In this as in much else, the world does not scruple to accept a half-truth which it welcomes with the jubilation which ought to be accorded to the whole truth, at the same time feeling vaguely that every one is at once victim and perpetrator of a confidence trick.

This new group is slowly growing, and the time has come to name and confer a status on its members. They are the neo-illiterates and they are far more threatening and dangerous than the pure illiterates. They do not lurk in the shadows of ignorance with the devil nor do they aspire to the light of divine knowledge. They are capable of everything yet venture nothing....

There is a further consequence of their inexcusable numbers: we must abandon our idolatrous and hypnotic attitude towards the so-called "problem of illiteracy". Modern educational policy has a fetish, a blood-stained deity to which every-thing is sacrificed though it guarantees nothing to its most fervent worshippers the struggle against illiteracy. This phrase, repeated over and over again in newspapers, magazines and political rhetoric, strikes awe into people's hearts.

Some of my readers may feel indignant at this heretic who has the emency to harbour doubts about the struggle against illiteracy. Yet, if my argument is, or at least may be, well founded, namely that teaching people to read is not enough, in most cases, to wrest them from their original spiritual poverty — or, as T.S. Eliot put it, that "only in a very limited sense can it be said that education produces culture" — it will perhaps be understood that what I am at-

tempting to do is to give to this phrase, this slogan, this endeavour—"the struggle against illiteracy"— a new vigour.

I do not wish to minimize the tragedy of illiteracy; on the contrary, I believe that we are faced by two powerful enemies.

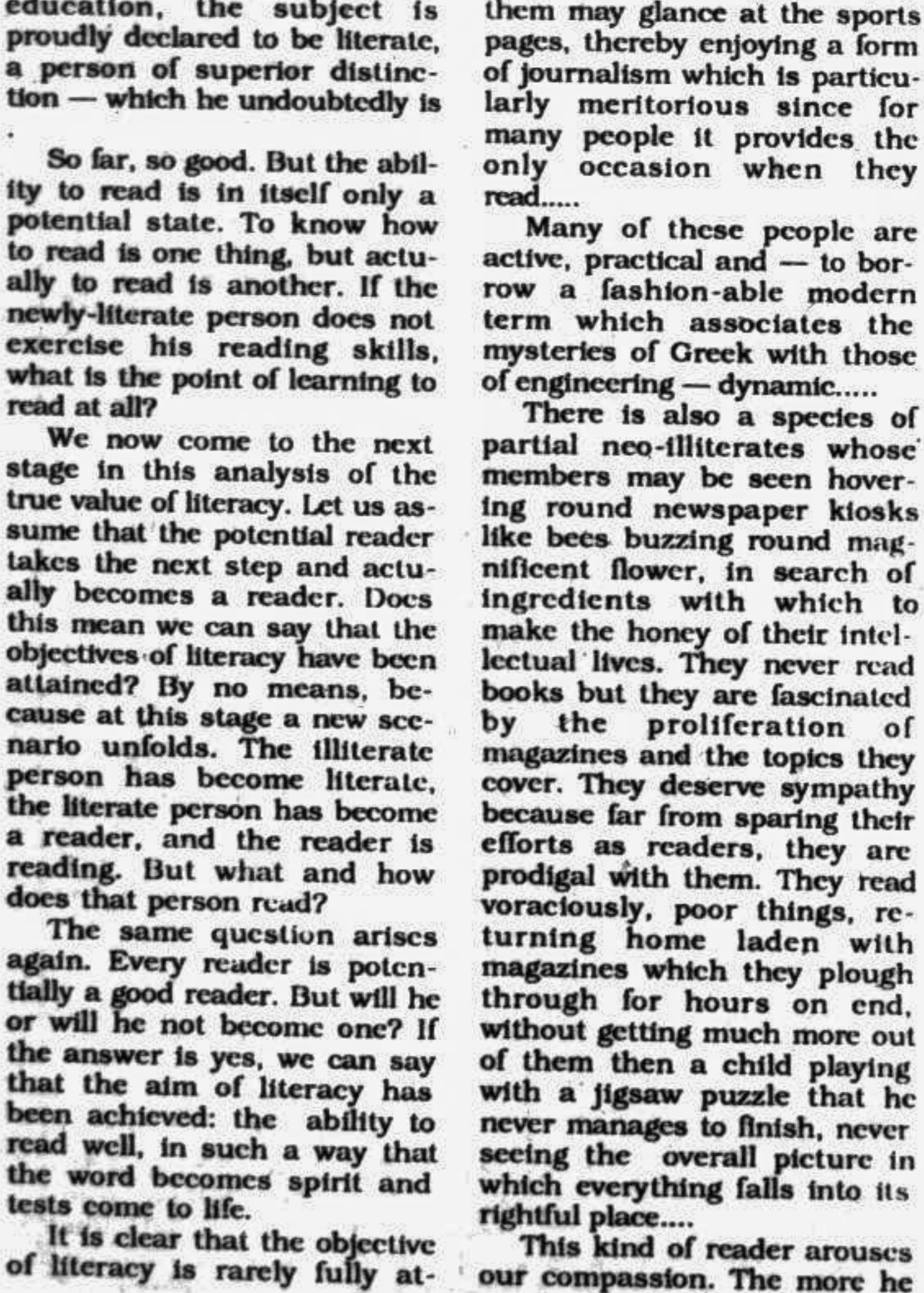
One is the long familiar, immediately recognizable enemy on whom our educational big guns are trained; but beside it is another figure disguised behind the mask of literacy, deceiving us, making us believe that it is not a problem, that it is one of us, one of the workers in the city of the mind, when in reality it is the fifth column of total illiteracy, the sworn enemy, through inert opposition, of the word become spirit.

It is of course praiseworthy that thousands upon thousands of children are today snatched from the jaws of illiteracy by primary education. But these innocents, newly saved from the darkness of illiteracy, from the dragon of native ignorance, must be closely watched. A terrible surprise lies in wait.

These infants start out in life armed only with basic reading and writing skills, confident in the belief that they have already conquered their native ignorance, only to encounter a much more formidable adversary around the next corner.

This new Circe lures them to her and turns them into lesser beings, neo-illiterates who will live contentedly in the snug confines of unawareness, with all the material advantages of the modern world yet sentenced for life to another form of ignorance — surfeit, not with the acorns of Homer's noble oak, but with the synthetic sustenance that is the ultimate miracle of progress.

(Courtesy UNESCO)



Browsing among books in a library.

Valuing women equally

Women have the right to equality before the law and equal opportunities for education, employment and health care. They also have the right to control their own fertility. For women "freedom to choose is the freedom from which other freedoms flow."

Education for girls

Pakistan, where less than 25% of women have basic literacy skills, expects a population growth rate of 2.9% per year between now and the end of the century. By contrast, in Thailand the projected rate of population growth is only 1.4% per year — and nearly all women are literate.

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Warning: pregnancy and childbirth can damage your health

- Half a million women die each year from complications of pregnancy and childbirth.
- Adolescents are especially at risk: maternal deaths are up to 3-times higher in this age group than for women aged 20-24 years.
- Many women, desperate to end unwanted pregnancies, seek abortions which are often illicit and frequently dangerous. The proportion of maternal deaths from illegal abortion is around 29% in Ethiopia, 20% in Bangladesh and 64% in China.

Lessons for men

- Out of the 105 million children out of school, 60% are girls.
- But educating girls makes good sense since higher female literacy is associated with fewer births through increased contraceptive use.
- Curiously, this association between education and contraception appears not to be the case for men. More males than females receive education in developing countries, yet male methods account for only 15% of contraceptive use there.

'Read our lips — we want fewer children'

More women than in any previous generation are saying they want fewer children.

- In Senegal the number of women who did not want any more children more than doubled from 8% in the late 1970s to 17% in the 1980s.
- During the same period in Peru this number went up from 61% to 73% of women there.
- In the richer countries of North America and Europe where people have education and access to contraception, most couples choose to have small families.

Study in The USSR : New Developments

INTERNAL difficulties in the Soviet Union cannot but affect the life of students, especially foreigners, plagued chiefly by low living standards, says Alexei Golubev, head of the foreign student board of the USSR Committee for Education.

Growing prices and shortages in merchandise are a serious inconvenience. Plus instability and ethnic discord are there in some Soviet Republics with colleges and universities, attended by foreign students.

In the opinion of Alexei Golubev, the solution of student problems largely depends on general improvements and Soviet economic renewal. For the time being, price rise is partially compensated by higher scholarships, other measures are being considered to facilitate the life of foreign students in this complicated period, says Golubev.

But doubts in the quality of Soviet higher education and rumours about the decreased training standards are groundless. The democratic reforms are, according to Golubev, conducive to discarding old dogmas which slackened the development of science, above all, the humanities and adopting a new system of training foreign specialists. "While previously they came mainly under inter-government agreements,

their Soviet fellow students, since specialisation occupies the primary place in their studies and is oriented towards climatic and other specific conditions of Asian, African and Latin American countries. For instance, tropical medicine, veterinary, tropical agriculture, in all, the USSR has worked out over 160 such specific courses and aids over the past decade. Introduction of a new system of knowledge assessment might be helpful in foreign students' job-placement, says Golubev. Thus, only the best-trained graduates will be granted the master's degree accepted in other countries. Those who show worse academic performance, will graduate with the lower, bachelor, rank.

(IAN)

School Beseet With Problems

OUR Correspondent
MAGURA: The Asia Khatun Primary School of village Bhatina in Magura sadar upazila is beset with various problems.

The school which was set up in 1974 is now being run with 300 students of the locality. Inadequacy of physical facilities and financial insolventy are, however, affecting the smooth functioning of the school.

The school building does not have enough space. As there is no verandah of the building it is inconvenient to move from one room to another when there is rainfall.

Double Shift Schooling

PRIMARY education in Senegal cost \$117 per pupil in 1986 — by far the highest of all low-income countries in Africa and almost twice the average for Sub-Saharan Africa. There were three reasons for this : high teachers' salaries (more than ten times the per capita GDP in 1980), low pupil-teacher ratios in the rural areas and high administrative costs.

To reduce costs, the government introduced double shifts in urban schools as part of its educational reform programme. In the pilot phase in 1982, each classroom was used twice a day with a different teacher.

But now in the main phase of the programme, both morning and afternoon sessions are taken by the same teachers. They have to teach 40 hours a week instead of the 27 hours under the previous system, but for this they receive an additional 25% on their base salary. They are also teaching smaller classes — reduced from 70 to 100 pupils to 40 or 50.

Assistant teachers (who receive a shorter training programme) also play an important part in the reform. The ratio of assistants to teachers increased from 0.9 to 1.2 between 1986 and 1988, without any drop in standards. Indeed, test results show that classes taught by assistants did better than those with fully qualified teachers. As a result, new appointments are more likely to be assistants than fully trained teachers. Administrative staff, too, are becoming more productive as they are redeployed into primary teaching.

Not everything has run smoothly. In a drive to increase the access to primary education, the programme was implemented faster than originally planned. Some teachers had to operate the new system without special training. And parents, uncertain about the changes, resisted them.

Overall, however, the programme is successful. Unit costs are being reduced. And gross primary enrollment increased from 46% in 1980 to 57% in 1985 and 59% in 1988 — with no drop in the performance of the pupils.

Source : Human Development Report 1991.



Star photo.

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